A STARLESS CLAN
WARRIORS
STAR
ERIN HUNTER
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A STARLESS CLAN

WARRIORS

STAR

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

To my lovely Jo

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

SQUIRRELSTAR—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

DEPUTY

IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

MEDICINE CATS

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom

APPRENTICE, BRISTLEPAW (orange-and-white tabby she-cat)

POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

NIGHTHEART—black tom

APPRENTICE, WAFFLEPAW (gray-and-brown tom)

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

APPRENTICE, STEMPAW (orange tabby tom)

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW (white tom with gray spots)

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

HERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes
BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches
BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER — **TIGERSTAR—**dark brown tabby tom

DEPUTY — **CLOVERFOOT—**gray tabby she-cat

MEDICINE CATS — **PUDDLESHINE—**brown tom with white splotches

SHADOWSIGHT—gray tabby tom

WARRIORS — **TAWNYPELT—**tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
STONEWING—white tom
SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom with slashed ears
FLAXFOOT—brown tabby tom
SNOWBIRD—pure white she-cat with green eyes
YARROWLEAF—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes
GRASSHEART—pale brown tabby she-cat
WHORLPELT—gray-and-white tom
HOPWHISKER—calico she-cat
BLAZEFIRE—white-and-ginger tom
FLOWERSTEM—silver she-cat
SNAKETOOTH—honey-colored tabby she-cat
SLATEFUR—sleek gray tom
APPRENTICE, BIRCHPAW (light brown tom)
POUNCESTEP—gray tabby she-cat
LIGHTLEAP—brown tabby she-cat
GULLSWOOP—white she-cat
SPIRECLAW—black-and-white tom
FRINGEWHISKER—white she-cat with brown splotches

DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with green eyes

QUEENS

CINNAMONTAIL—brown tabby she-cat with white paws (mother to Firkit, a brown tabby tom, Streamkit, a gray tabby she-kit, Bloomkit, a black she-kit, and Whisperkit, a gray tom)

ELDERS

OAKFUR—small brown tom

SKYCLAN

LEADER

LEAFSTAR—brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY

HAWKWING—dark gray tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS

FRECKLEWISH—mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs

FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom

MEDIATOR

TREE—yellow tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

SPARROWPELT—dark brown tabby tom

MACGYVER—black-and-white tom

DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

KITESCRATCH—reddish-brown tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, BEETLEPAW (white-and-black tabby tom)

MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

NETTLESPLASH—pale brown tom

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat

VIOLETSHINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

BELLALEAF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears

PIGEONFOOT—gray-and-white she-cat

GRAVELNOSE—tan tom

SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat

APPRENTICE, BEEPAW (white-and-tabby she-cat)

NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

QUEENS

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat (mother to Ridgekit, a reddish she-kit with a white nose, and Duskkit, a white tom with brown paws and ears)

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

WINDCLAN

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

APPRENTICE, WHISTLEPAW (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

APPLESHINE—yellow tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

WOODSONG—brown she-cat

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom

SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom

SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest

OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom

HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

QUEENS

LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat (mother to Stripekit, a gray tabby tom, and Brookkit, a black-and-white tom)

FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat (mother to Leafkit, a white she-kit with gray spots; Branchkit, a white tom-kit; and Grasskit, an auburn she-kit)

ELDERS

WHISKERNOSE—light brown tom

GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

SPLASHTAIL—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY

BERRYHEART—black-and-white she-cat

MEDICINE CATS

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom

WARRIORS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat

MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat

MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom

SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat

LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom

SNEEZECLOUD—gray-and-white tom

BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat

FOGNOSE—gray-and-white she-cat

ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, MISTPAW (tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat)

OWLNOSE—brown tabby tom

HOLLOWSPRING—black tom

GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears

SPARROWTAIL—large brown tabby tom

NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

BREEZEHEART—brown-and-white she-cat

APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW (silver tabby tom)

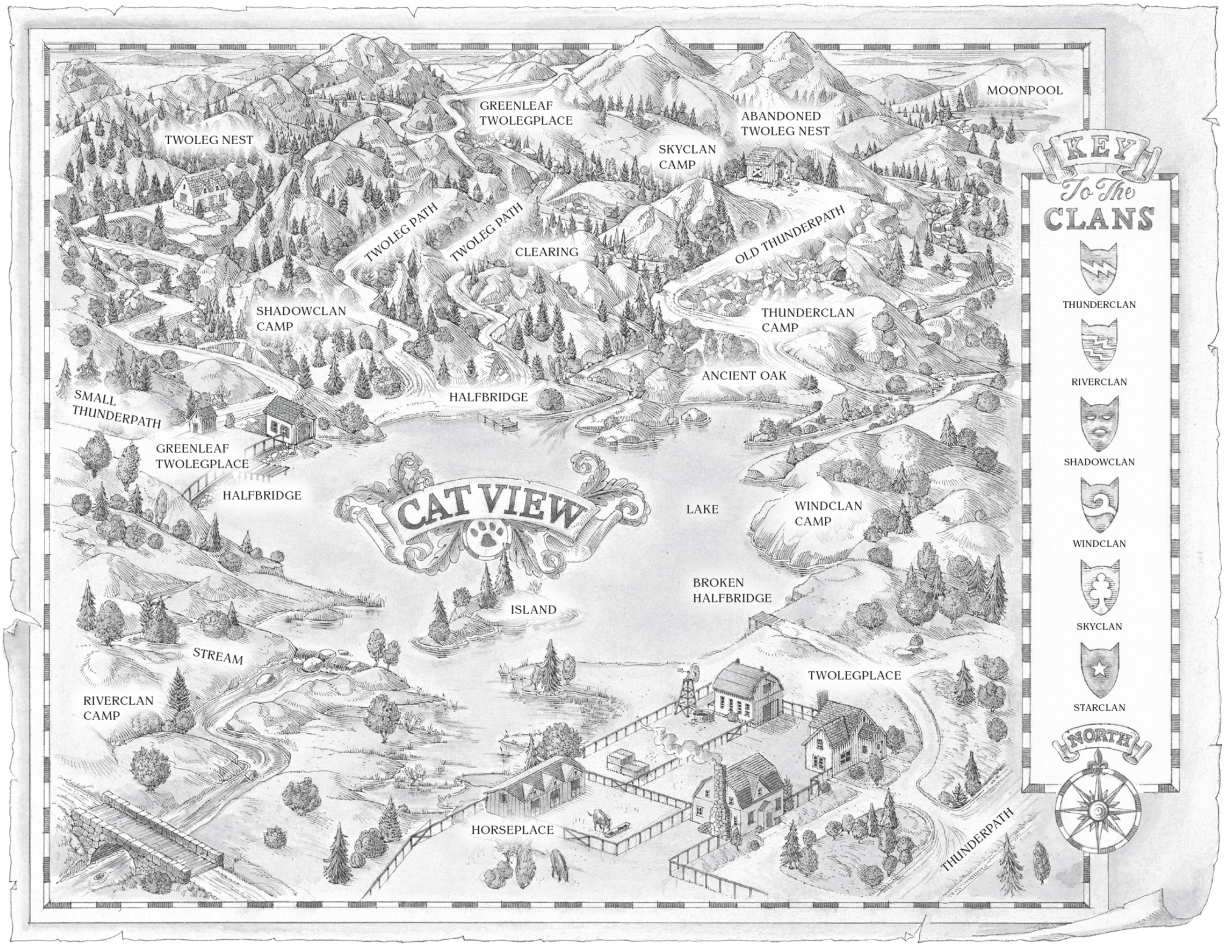
QUEENS

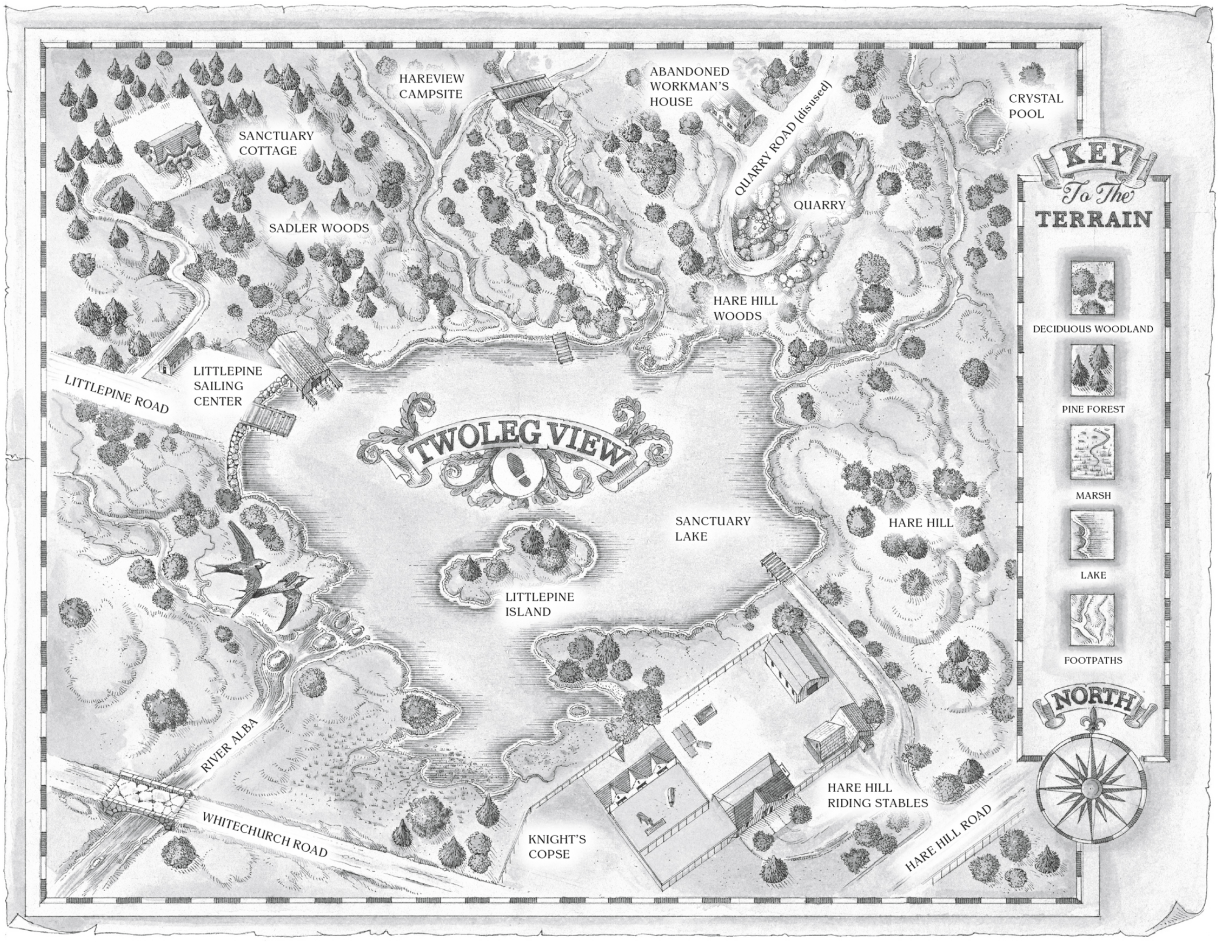
HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat (mother to Floatkit, a tawny she-kit; Rapidkit, a gray-and-white she-kit; and Troutkit, a brown-and-white spotted tom)

ELDERS

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Maps


CAT VIEW
KEY To The CLANS
THUNDERCLAN
RIVERCLAN
SHADOWCLAN
WINDCLAN
SKYCLAN
STARCLAN
NORTH
MOONPOOL
ABANDONED TWOLEG NEST
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
TWOLEG NEST
SKYCLAN CAMP
TWOLEG PATH
TWOLEG PATH
CLEARING
OLD THUNDERPATH
SHADOWCLAN CAMP
THUNDERCLAN CAMP
ANCIENT OAK
HALFBRIDGE
SMALL THUNDERPATH
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
HALFBRIDGE
LAKE
WINDCLAN CAMP
BROKEN HALFBRIDGE
ISLAND
STREAM
RIVERCLAN CAMP
TWOLEGPLACE
HORSEPLACE
THUNDERPATH


HAREVIEW CAMPSITE
ABANDONED WORKMAN'S HOUSE
QUARRY ROAD (disused)
CRYSTAL POOL
SANCTUARY COTTAGE
QUARRY
SADLER WOODS
HARE HILL WOODS
KEY To The TERRAIN
DECIDUOUS WOODLAND
PINE FOREST
MARSH
LAKE
FOOTPATHS
NORTH
LITTLEPINE ROAD
LITTLEPINE SAILING CENTER
TWOLEG VIEW
SANCTUARY LAKE
HARE HILL
LITTLEPINE ISLAND
RIVER ALBA
HARE HILL RIDING STABLES
WHITECHURCH ROAD
KNIGHT'S COPSE
HARE HILL ROAD

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Prologue

Splashstar woke. He lay still for a moment without opening his eyes, enjoying the warmth of his nest. His Clanmates were already awake, murmuring outside in hushed mews. The wind rustled the reeds in the marsh outside camp, and birds called from the trees downriver. Splashstar stretched and padded from his den. A cold mist still lingered over the marsh, but the sun was lifting high into a chilly blue sky, and his Clanmates were busy with their duties. He'd slept late. But why shouldn't he? He was leader now. Leaders had privileges.

His plan to lie, to tell his Clanmates that StarClan had granted him nine lives, had worked perfectly. Now his warriors showed him respect where they had once expressed suspicion.

Shimmerpelt and Lizardtail were weeding rotten stalks from the camp wall while Gorseclaw and Sneezecloud pulled stale bedding from the warriors' den. Splashstar purred quietly to himself, his breath billowing around him. He liked to watch his Clanmates work. Especially when he didn't have to.

Harelight padded into camp. The white tom was dripping from the river, and he held a plump trout in his mouth. Splashstar swiped his tongue eagerly around his jaws. Harelight saw him and winked at him.

Irritation sparked in Splashstar's chest. How dare his deputy look so pleased with himself? He'd been looking pleased with himself a lot lately. Where had he learned such arrogance? From Tigerstar? Perhaps the moons he'd spent living as a ShadowClan cat had made him think he was better than his Clanmates. Splashstar flexed his claws. *I'm going to show you and everyone else that RiverClan warriors are the best.*

Mallownose and Mistpaw followed Harelight into camp. They were carrying fish too. They crossed the clearing and dropped their catch onto the fresh-kill pile, but Splashstar didn't take his eyes from Harelight. He wanted that fat trout. He was entitled to it, and he was hungry.

He padded toward the white tom and snatched the dangling tail of the trout with his teeth, yanking it from Harelight's jaws. Turning away, he carried it to the edge of the clearing, where the rushes would shelter him from the cold wind as he ate. He'd enjoyed the look of surprise on Harelight's face. He'd enjoyed not having to explain himself. He was going to enjoy this meal.

As he dropped the trout and crouched to eat, the rushes beside him quivered. He saw, with a start, a pale brown tail snaking away between the stems. Fear clutched at his belly. He recognized that fur. *Not again!* Stiffening with dread, he looked back across the clearing. His Clanmates were gone. The camp was deserted. *Please, no!* Horror began to worm its way up his spine. *It can't be!* Panic gripped his heart. *It mustn't!* A wail pressed in his throat, and he fought to swallow it back as he realized the awful truth. *This is another dream!*

Wake up! Wake up! He tried to struggle from sleep, but the dream wasn't going to let him go. The rushes were still quivering, and every hair on his pelt seemed to shrink back into his flesh at the thought of following that tail. But he had no choice. His paws drew him forward as though the tail had hooked them and was dragging him after it.

Please wake up! He shook himself, wishing he were anywhere but here, pushing through the rushes, wading across the narrow channel of water, breaking out into a foggy clearing.

She was waiting, the mist thinning to reveal her matted fur.

Curlfeather.

Her pelt was torn and bloody as though the dogs Splashstar had set on her trail had only just finished ripping her apart. One of her ears was missing. Her cheek was gashed so deeply that when she turned her cold gaze on him, it looked as though her lip had opened into a mocking snarl that reached all the way to her eye.

"Hello, Splashtail."

"Splash*star*." He wasn't going to show her he was scared.

Amusement shone in her eyes. "Do you really think I'm going to call you that?"

"It's my name—"

She cut him off. “We both know *I* should be RiverClan’s leader, if only you hadn’t been so greedy and killed me.”

“I did it for RiverClan!”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “Do you really believe that?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then why is RiverClan such a mess?”

“It’s not.” Anger surged in Splashstar’s chest. “RiverClan is doing better than it has in moons. It has a leader who will make its warriors strong. It’s preparing for battle. By newleaf, RiverClan will control every territory around the lake!”

Curlfeather growled. “Do you think StarClan will let you, when they wouldn’t even give you their blessing?”

“I don’t *need* their blessing!” Splashstar snapped.

“And yet you told your Clan that you have it.” Curlfeather’s gaze sharpened with interest. “Which means you *know* its importance.”

“To the rest of RiverClan, maybe.” Splashstar glared back at her. “But they don’t understand yet that *we* control our lives, not StarClan.” Surely Curlfeather could see something that simple. “Until they do, it’s easier to just let them believe that StarClan gave me nine lives.”

“Nine lives would be useful, though, surely?”

“Only a weak leader needs nine lives!” Frustration stabbed Splashstar’s belly. “I’m not going to let a bunch of dead cats tell me what to do.” *And that includes you.* “I’m going to be stronger than you could ever imagine. I’m going to be leader of all the Clans.”

“Leader of all the Clans?” Curlfeather snorted. “How do you expect to achieve that? A moon ago RiverClan couldn’t even keep ShadowClan out of its camp. It’s like a kitten facing a fox.”

“That’s not true.” How could she have so little faith in her Clan?

“Every Clan is against you, Splashtail,” Curlfeather snarled. “There’s no way you can fight them all.”

“We might not have the strength yet,” Splashstar snarled back. “But I’m smart.”

“You think the other Clans aren’t?”

“I’ll be smarter!”

The look of disdain in Curlfeather’s eyes sent rage pulsing beneath Splashstar’s pelt. He wished this repulsive old warrior

weren't already dead so that he could kill her with his own claws.

"You're not even smart enough to realize that your own Clan doesn't like you," she growled. "Don't you know that Duskfur, Mothwing, and Icewing have been whispering in their Clanmates' ears, trying to persuade them to turn on you and chase you out?" Splashstar stiffened but forced his fur flat. He wasn't going to let her see that she'd alarmed him. "Even Harelight only half believes the nonsense you spew," Curlfeather went on. "The only reason RiverClan tolerates you as their leader is because you're not Tigerstar. They'd have accepted any cat if it meant keeping ShadowClan out of their camp. But if you push them, they'll turn on you. They'll chase you out of the camp like a diseased rat."

"Shut up!" Splashstar wanted to slash his claws across her bloody face. He tried to lunge at her, lash out with his paw, but he couldn't move. He was paralyzed by his dream. His rage, trapped inside him like a swarm of bees, throbbed in his chest and buzzed in his ears. She padded closer. Her wounds gaped red and wet like open mouths. He could smell her blood and see it glisten right down to the bone. Nausea churned in his belly and rose in his throat, but he could only growl at her helplessly as she stopped a muzzle-length away.

"You ruined everything by murdering me." Curlfeather's mew was hard with contempt. "I had a plan that would have *worked*. I had the respect of my Clanmates. And I had control over Frostpaw—*real* control, not just lies and threats. You even had to invent a fake medicine cat. *I* wouldn't have needed to. And I wouldn't have had to try to shut her up with a clumsy murder attempt. Frostpaw trusted me in a way she would never have trusted you. You made a mess of it all." She narrowed her eyes to slits and let her gaze crawl over him like a spider. "I would have led RiverClan into a golden dawn, not a bloody sunset."

"Shut up!" Fury burned in Splashstar's belly. "Leave me alone! I'm sick of listening to you!"

"Leave you alone?" Curlfeather's eyes flashed. "You *murdered* me! Then you tried to murder my kit!" She padded around him as he tried to struggle free of his nightmare. He willed himself again to wake up. "I will never let you go. I'll always be beside you, because I

want to watch you fail. I want to be there when your Clanmates turn on you. I want to see the other Clans drive you out."

"Shut up!" Splashstar's desperate yowl woke him. He jerked up his head, relieved to find himself safe in his nest inside the leader's den. His pelt was clammy, and fear gripped his chest. But he was awake and free of Curlfeather. For now.

He pushed himself to his paws, trying not to tremble. He knew she'd be back. She'd be waiting for him to sleep. He dreamed of her every night now. But once RiverClan was triumphant, once it ruled the whole lake, she wouldn't dare show her face again.

At least the vicious old fleabag had given him an important piece of information. *Don't you know that Duskfur, Mothwing, and Icewing have been whispering in their Clanmates' ears, trying to persuade them to turn on you and chase you out? Even Harelight only half believes the nonsense you spew.*

If what Curlfeather had said was true, he would have to act—and he would have to act soon.

Chapter 1

Nightheart could feel Sunbeam's breath on his shoulder. It was warm, her muzzle buried deep in his fur. Around them, the damp river air was growing chilly, and Nightheart was uncomfortably aware how close they still were to the RiverClan camp.

Hidden here, at the top of the slope, they'd watched Splashtail murder Harelight in front of the whole Clan. The false leader had slit his deputy's throat with a single swipe. And for what? Harelight had simply questioned him. And no cat had protested. Why? Because they believed he had StarClan's blessing? Because they were afraid?

Nightheart glanced at Frostpaw. In the gathering dusk, the young RiverClan she-cat's eyes were dark. She held her chin stiffly, drawn in as though protecting her own throat, and Nightheart wondered if she was remembering how Splashtail had nearly killed her the same way he'd killed Harelight. He blinked at her reassuringly. He wasn't going to let Splashtail harm the exiled medicine-cat apprentice again.

But they needed to get away. He shifted his paws, hoping to gently nudge Sunbeam into action. But Sunbeam didn't move. The shock of seeing her mother standing there in camp, next to the murderous Splashtail, seemed to have turned her to stone.

What was Berryheart doing in *RiverClan*? Nightheart knew that the former ShadowClan warrior had disagreed with Tigerstar vehemently enough to make her decide to leave her birth Clan and take Hollowspring and Sparrowtail with her, but the last he'd heard, she'd been sick, sheltering outside Clan territory, beyond the WindClan border. Now all three cats had appeared here in RiverClan, acting as though they were part of it. Nightheart frowned. Didn't Berryheart disapprove of cats switching Clans? She'd certainly disapproved when he'd wanted to join ShadowClan to be with Sunbeam. Had she formed such a strong bond with Splashtail when she used him to plot against Tigerstar that she was willing now to follow him anywhere?

Berryheart certainly seemed close to RiverClan's vicious leader. She'd watched as he'd murdered Harelight. And, when he'd named

her deputy in Harelight's place, she'd said she was *honored*! Nightheart pressed closer to Sunbeam, shuddering as he wondered if Sunbeam's terrible suspicion was true. Had Berryheart known in advance that Splashtail would murder Harelight? She'd certainly appeared calm as she'd looked at his body lying dead in a pool of his own blood. Had she been anticipating taking his place as deputy?

Below them, RiverClan's cheers for their new deputy had died down. Didn't Splashtail notice how hollow they'd sounded? Didn't he care? Nightheart felt the chilly air reach deeper into his fur. Long shadows were swallowing the RiverClan camp. He could no longer make out the expressions on the faces of the RiverClan warriors. Now that the drama was over, he couldn't be sure what they were thinking. Splashtail had left them with a stark choice: support their vicious leader or face Harelight's fate.

Nightheart's pelt prickled nervously. Whatever they decided, they would be on edge. Any moment now, they might lift their gazes and look beyond their camp walls. *We have to get out of here.*

Before he could speak, Frostpaw's urgent whisper cut him off. "We need to find Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing . . . and any other cats they convinced to leave with them," she hissed. "We have to get them to safety immediately."

At last Sunbeam drew awake.

Nightheart reached for her gaze. "Are you okay?"

She nodded but didn't look at him. Her attention was on Frostpaw.

"It's the only chance for the RiverClan I know to survive," the medicine-cat apprentice pressed.

There was a catch in her mew. It tugged sharply in Nightheart's chest. He knew how deep her panic reached. He'd once nearly lost his own Clan to the impostor Ashfur. "Let's get away from here and make a plan," he mewed.

Sunbeam nodded. "The sooner we leave this place the better," she growled.

Pain flashed in Frostpaw's gaze. "It wasn't always like this."

"I know." Sunbeam's mew softened. "We're going to fix it."

Nightheart wondered if it was possible to fix the mess Splashtail had made of RiverClan. But he kept the thought to himself. "Come

on.” He led the way back through the bushes and along the trail that had brought them here, down the slope to the stream, back to the lake. Their fur still smelled of the catmint Frostpaw had told them to roll in to disguise their scent, and now Nightheart shook out his pelt, relaxing a little as he saw ripples lapping the shore. The three tail-lengths of land between the water and Clan territory were neutral, but he didn’t want to linger even here. Splashtail clearly thought himself above Clan law.

He looked at Frostpaw and Sunbeam as they stopped beside him. In the gathering gloom, Frostpaw’s pale gray fur looked almost blue, while the patches of white on Sunbeam’s pelt glowed as though already touched by moonlight. Their tails were twitching. They must be uneasy too. “Where should we look for Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing?” he asked them.

“The horseplace,” Frostpaw mewed at once. She swung her muzzle toward the Twoleg meadows nestling between RiverClan’s marshes and WindClan’s moor.

“Surely they’d have made for ShadowClan,” Sunbeam argued.

“The horseplace would be safer,” Frostpaw insisted. “It’s outside the Clans. And Smoky would take them in. He looked after me when . . .” She hesitated. “When I was hurt.” She’d avoided mentioning who’d hurt her. Was the memory of Splashtail’s attack still too raw?

“Mothwing and Icewing have already lived in ShadowClan,” Sunbeam reminded her. “It became their second home after Ashfur convinced Mistystar to exile them.”

“All the more reason not to want to drag ShadowClan into conflict with Splashtail,” Frostpaw answered.

Sunbeam lifted her chin. “Tigerstar’s not scared of conflict.”

“Nor is Squirrelstar,” Nightheart countered. “They might have headed for ThunderClan territory.” But even as he said it, he felt unsure. Another idea was tugging at the back of his mind. He gazed distractedly around the lake. There could be a third place they were hiding. “What about the Twoleg greenleaf camp?”

The field at the edge of the lake between ShadowClan and RiverClan, where the Twolegs came whenever the weather was bright, was only a little way around the shore. He could see it from

here, in the half-light, the grass dotted even now in early leaf-bare with Twoleg pelt dens. The strange domes were lit up by tiny stars the Twolegs had brought with them, and Twolegs were moving in and out. His pelt prickled nervously. He could see their dogs and smell their hot, meaty scent drifting down to the lake.

Sunbeam followed his gaze, her ears twitching. “It’s way too dangerous.”

Frostpaw agreed. “They wouldn’t risk it.”

“Which makes it a perfect hiding place,” Nightheart argued. “Splashtail wouldn’t think of searching there. Even if he did, what patrol would be able to detect their scent through all the Twoleg stench?”

“If their own Clanmates couldn’t detect their scent, what makes you think you can?” Sunbeam argued.

Nightheart felt a tug of doubt. She made a good point. But the suspicion that the RiverClan fugitives could be hiding among the Twolegs was lodged stubbornly in his mind. He needed to check. “I have to try.”

“Why don’t we split up?” Frostpaw clearly didn’t want to waste any more time in discussion. “I’ll try the horseplace, Sunbeam can check the ShadowClan border, and you can see if there’s any sign of them in the Twoleg camp.”

“Good idea.” Nightheart wanted to get moving too. Anxiety was gathering in his chest.

Sunbeam looked worried. “I don’t like you going to the Twoleg camp alone.”

“I’ll be careful,” he promised. He meant it. He was keenly aware that sneaking among the Twolegs and their dogs was dangerous.

“Nightheart is clever,” Frostpaw reassured her. “Didn’t he used to sneak into ShadowClan territory to see you?”

“Yes, and he got in trouble for it,” Sunbeam told her.

“I’ll be careful,” Nightheart told her again, this time touching his muzzle to her cheek. “I promise.”

“Let’s go.” Frostpaw scanned the marshes. “While there’s still light.” The moon was already showing above the moor, ghostlike in the pale blue sky. “We can meet up beside the old tree stump on the

ThunderClan shore when we're done." She hurried away along the shore toward the horseplace.

Sunbeam watched her go. "Will she be okay on her own?"

"She's got good warrior instincts." Nightheart hoped it would be enough to keep her safe. "When we traveled together, she saved me more than once." He began to head for the Twoleg camp.

Sunbeam fell in beside him. "Do you think we'll find them?" She meant Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing.

"I don't know." Nightheart stared ahead, his pelt prickling with anxiety. "But we have a good chance. They can't have gone far."

"I think Splashtail's lost his mind," Sunbeam mewed.

"Some cats are just evil." Nightheart remembered living under Ashfur. A bad leader could make the living world seem like the Dark Forest. He pushed the thought away. If he was going to help RiverClan, he couldn't let fear swamp him.

The halfbridge jutted ahead of them, stretching like a paw over the water. Beyond it, the Twoleg camp sprawled up the hillside, bounded by the forest. From here the camp looked even bigger, and Nightheart had to force his tail not to tremble. On the shore, reeds had spread from the marsh and grew thickly around the edge of the lake. As he followed Sunbeam past them and they skirted the halfbridge, the mouthwatering smell of Twoleg food filled the air.

Nightheart opened his mouth and let the scents bathe his tongue. A purr rose in his throat. "Do you remember scavenging at that Twolegplace with the bright flashing monsters?"

"Of course." Sunbeam's pelt brushed his. "Do you remember how outraged Rootspring was at the thought of eating Twoleg food?"

Nightheart purred louder. "He still ate it."

"Of course he did." Sunbeam swiped her tongue around her jaws. "It was delicious."

Nightheart glanced at her. "That's when I realized how brave you were."

"It took you *that* long?" She nudged him, then glanced toward the Twoleg camp. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes." Nightheart lifted his tail confidently even though his heart was pounding.

“I’ll see you soon, then.” Whisking her tail, Sunbeam turned and headed along the shore, making for ShadowClan territory. As she neared the pines, she broke into a run.

Nightheart watched her for a moment, then turned toward the Twoleg camp. Grass spread like a thick pelt over the hillside, enclosed by forest, which stretched down to the shore at either edge. Nightheart headed for the closest trees and ducked into their shadow as a Twoleg dog began to bark near one of the pelt dens. Picking his way among browning ferns and stiff bracken, he skirted the camp, his paws pricking nervously. There seemed to be pelt dens and Twolegs everywhere, and more dogs than he’d ever seen. The dogs could clearly smell him, raising their heads and turning to bark as he passed. Fortunately, they were tethered with brightly colored vines. Some pulled on their tethers, straining to run at him, their eyes lighting up as they glimpsed him between the trees. But the tethers held, and he kept going, tasting the air, scanning the forest, until he’d circled the whole camp.

There was no sign of Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing. If they *were* here, their scents were lost in the jumble of other smells. The food scent was overpowering. Some of the Twolegs had started fires outside their dens and were holding morsels, impaled on twigs, over the flames. Nightheart wondered why they wanted to burn their food before they ate it. It seemed dangerous. The fires were sending bright sparks up into the darkening sky. An ember might set one of their flimsy dens alight. Then he realized, his mouth watering, that their food smelled even tastier when it was spitting and crackling with the heat.

Don’t get distracted. He jerked his attention away from the sizzling food and began to follow the forest up and around the Twoleg camp, then back down toward the shore, searching the shadows for a glimpse of the RiverClan cats. Feeling bolder now that he’d seen that the dogs were tied and the Twolegs were only interested in each other and their food, Nightheart slid from the trees and began to track his way back around the field. Pushing through tangled weeds, he looked for signs of Frostpaw’s missing Clanmates —trodden grass, stray hairs, anything that might give him a clue as to where they could be. But there was nothing. He was beginning to

doubt whether Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing would have chosen to hide here. It might be true that the Twolegs would keep RiverClan patrols away, but would Clan cats really risk staying close to so many dogs? Nightheart frowned. Perhaps he should have gone with Frostpaw or Sunbeam.

A yelp made Nightheart turn, his pelt spiking as he saw three Twoleg kits racing toward him, less than a tree-length away. They ran clumsily, stiff in their thick, colorful pelts. But their gazes were fixed on him, their eyes glittering with excitement as they charged across the grass.

Nightheart fled into the forest, alarm sparking through his pelt, and plunged into the bracken. Hiding beneath the thick fronds, he crouched and watched the kits. Surely they wouldn't follow him into the darkness! He'd wait here until they returned to their kin; then he'd sneak back into the Twoleg camp. It would be dangerous now that the kits had picked up his scent, but he wasn't ready to leave yet. He still needed to check as far as the shoreline, just to be certain Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing weren't here. He forced himself to be still. His legs were trembling with unspent energy, and he pressed his paws hard against the earth to stop them. But the Twoleg kits kept coming, charging among the trees, leaping roots, crashing through bracken, and yelping to each other as they spread out to encircle him.

Fox dung! He'd have to run. Nightheart turned and pounded over the earth, kicking out fallen leaves behind him as he pelted downhill and broke cover at the lakeside. Faster than a deer, he dived among the reeds and, pushing deeper, found himself wading into water. It gripped his legs with a chill that should have shocked him, but he barely felt it, his heart thumping and his thoughts racing as the Twoleg kits crunched after him across the pebbles, shrieking like foxes. The reeds closed behind him, screening him from view, but he kept going, the lake washing his belly fur until at last the Twoleg kits quieted. Slowing, doubling back, and peeping out, he saw them standing confused on the shore. A moment later a big Twoleg hollered from the hillside, and they turned and headed back toward the camp.

Nightheart's heart slowed. He could feel the icy chill of the water as it swirled against his flanks. He shivered but didn't move. He'd wait for the kits to push through the long grass back into the field before he ventured out to search the last stretch of their camp.

The moon was rising. Bats flitted overhead, swooping back and forth across the indigo sky. Would Frostpaw and Sunbeam be waiting for him? Beyond the halfbridge, a moorhen shot from the reeds and scurried across the shore. As Nightheart watched it disappear into the forest, a familiar scent touched his nose. His heart quickened again. He could smell RiverClan. Was it Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing? He hesitated, stiffening. What if Splashtail had sent a search patrol? He was cold and wet and tired from running; he'd be no match for a mob of hostile warriors.

Warily, Nightheart began to wade through the reeds, following the scent, every muscle tight, ready to fight if he ran into Splashtail's cats, knowing he'd be shredded if he did. The scent grew stronger, but he couldn't glimpse any pelts. He pricked his ears but heard only the barks and yelps of the Twolegs in the field.

Paws aching from the icy water, he waded out of the shallows and nosed his way from the reed bed. The halfbridge jutted darkly into the water. RiverClan scent hung like a threat in the damp night air, but there was no sign of movement. Nervously, Nightheart began to creep toward the halfbridge. As he neared it, the chatter of Twolegs made him turn. He tensed. A small group was heading for the shore. They had dogs with them.

The dogs pulled ahead, stretching their tethers as far as they could, straining for freedom. One seemed to catch Nightheart's scent, jerking its muzzle toward him. Its eyes flashed with excitement. With a howl, it tugged harder at its tether. The other dogs began to yelp and leap as they spotted him. But Nightheart held his ground. The dogs were tethered. He wasn't.

As their dogs fought to twist free, the Twolegs held on calmly, unfazed by the noise. Chattering to one another, they let their frenzied dogs tug them across the shore.

Nightheart swallowed as the lead dog glared at him. They were getting close, but Nightheart didn't move. *What if the tether breaks?* The thought jabbed his belly like a thorn, but he dug his paws harder

into the earth. He wasn't leaving. Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing might be here. He'd slash the dogs' muzzles if he had to, but he was staying until he'd checked out the RiverClan scent.

The dogs pulled nearer. Their eyes glittered as though they could already taste his blood. Nightheart arched his back, his pelt bristling as their meaty breath reached him. In a few more steps he'd feel it hot on his face. He braced himself, unsheathing his claws, ready to lunge, but then the lead dog froze. It looked away. Something else had caught its interest.

It turned its head toward the halfbridge. For a moment there was silence as the other dogs turned too. Then, as though burrs had been jabbed into their fur, they began to howl and yelp and pull their Twolegs excitedly toward the halfbridge.

The Twolegs stumbled after them, looking at each other in surprise, alarmed at last by their dogs' unruly behavior. The lead dog reached the halfbridge and ducked underneath, nearly jerking its Twoleg off its hind paws. As the other Twolegs struggled to hang on, the dog pack crowded in after it, their barks echoing into the shadows beneath the bridge.

Nightheart's breath caught. *Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing must be hiding there!* He'd missed their scent earlier because of the Twoleg food! He began to run forward. He had to distract the dogs.

He raced for the halfbridge, his tail bushing as the Twolegs lurched suddenly backward. Nightheart's breath quickened. At last! The Twolegs had finally found the strength to pull their dogs away.

Nightheart swerved and ducked beneath the bridge as, whimpering with frustration, the dogs writhed and fought against their tethers. But the Twolegs were determined now and, yelping sharply, hauled them toward the field. Catching his breath, Nightheart stood trembling in the shadows and watched the Twolegs drag their dogs back to camp.

"Who's there?" A taut mew echoed from the shadows at the far end of the halfbridge.

"Duskfur?" Nightheart jerked around, recognizing the mew. "It's me. Nightheart. From ThunderClan. Are you okay? Are Icewing and Mothwing with you?"

"Yes." Duskfur's mew was trembling. "Have the dogs left?"

“Yes. They’re in their camp.” Straining to see through the darkness, Nightheart could make out three pairs of gleaming eyes. As his own adjusted to the gloom, he could see the bedraggled shapes of the missing RiverClan cats. He padded toward them. They were shivering, huddled against the wall of mud where the halfbridge reached the shore. “Did the dogs hurt you?”

“They couldn’t reach us.” Duskfur’s pelt was still spiked.

Nightheart smelled blood. “But someone’s hurt.”

“Mothwing.” Icewing told him.

Nightheart could see the fur on the medicine cat’s shoulder, matted with blood, the flesh torn beneath. He recognized a claw wound. “Who did this?” Had they already run into one of Splashtail’s patrols?

Mothwing glanced at Duskfur, as though asking her not to tell. But Icewing spoke.

“It was Gorseclaw.” Her mew was hard with anger.

“Your *Clanmate*?” Nightheart stiffened. If she’d said Splashtail, Nightheart wouldn’t have been surprised, but *Gorseclaw*? RiverClan was a mess, but he didn’t think they’d actually hurt one another.

“It wasn’t his fault.” Mothwing’s mew was weak. “We were battle training.”

“But you’re a medicine cat.” Nightheart stared at her. “You shouldn’t have been battle training.”

“It was a punishment,” Icewing mewed coldly.

“For questioning Splashtail,” Duskfur told him.

“It’s just a scratch,” Mothwing mewed. “It’s really not that bad,”

“It’s deep and it’s *infected*,” Duskfur growled.

Nightheart struggled to understand. What did punishment have to do with battle training? “Did Splashtail *order* Gorseclaw to hurt you?”

“He forced the warriors to practice their lunges,” Duskfur explained.

“Using Mothwing as a target,” Icewing growled.

Nightheart could hardly believe his ears. It sounded like something that would only happen in the Dark Forest. “Why didn’t they keep their claws sheathed? I’d never—”

Icewing cut him off. “Splashtail punishes warriors who train with their claws sheathed.”

“Gorseclaw didn’t want to become the next target,” Mothwing murmured.

“Coward!” Icewing grunted. “He should have refused. They all should have refused!”

Mothwing looked sadly at the white warrior. “Don’t blame them,” she warned. “If we start blaming one another, it will only make it easier for Splashtail. *He’s* the enemy, not Gorseclaw or any other cat.”

“Gorseclaw wasn’t protecting *himself*,” Duskfur added. “He was protecting his kin. You know what Splashtail’s like. He likes to make a warrior suffer by torturing the cats they love most.”

“How do we fight a monster like that?” Icewing huffed angrily.

Nightheart blinked at her. “Didn’t you manage to persuade any of your Clanmates to stand up to him?”

Icewing looked away and Mothwing answered for her.

“They’re too frightened,” she told him.

“Splashtail caught us trying to convince Harelight to help us drive him out this morning.” Duskfur’s ears twitched anxiously. Nightheart tensed as he realized that these cats didn’t know yet that Harelight was dead. “We had to run before he could punish us.”

Icewing’s tail began to flick. “We should have stayed and fought.”

“He would have murdered us,” Duskfur argued.

“You did the right thing,” Nightheart told her. “Splashtail has given orders for you all to be hunted down and killed on sight.”

Duskfur’s fur lifted along her spine. “And Harelight agreed?”

Nightheart stared back, his mouth dry. “He killed Harelight.”

The three RiverClan cats didn’t move for a moment. Then Duskfur’s shoulders slumped. Mothwing seemed to shrink inside her pelt.

Icewing’s eyes blazed with fury. “Splashtail’s not a warrior; he’s a snake.”

Nightheart forced himself to go on. “Berryheart is the new deputy.”

Duskfur’s eyes widened. “But she’s a ShadowClan cat.”

“She’s a RiverClan warrior now,” Nightheart told her darkly.

Mothwing was shivering. “What will become of us?”

“RiverClan is ruined.” There was despair in Icewing’s mew. “It’s not the RiverClan I know anymore.”

“We’re going to get rid of Splashtail,” Nightheart promised. He prayed it was true.

“Are the other Clans going to drive him out?” Duskfur pricked her ears eagerly. “Has it been decided?”

“They mustn’t!” Mothwing looked alarmed. “Splashtail has his claws dug too deeply into RiverClan. If the other Clans try to tear them free, it will only bring more suffering.”

“Nothing’s been decided yet,” Nightheart told her.

The hope in Duskfur’s eyes faded. “Of course it hasn’t.” Her mew was bitter. “The Clans have done nothing about Splashtail so far. Why would they step in now?”

“They’ll *have* to, surely.” Nightheart reasoned. “Splashtail killed his deputy! He’s given orders to kill you!”

Duskfur stared at him bleakly. “Haven’t you learned yet that, for all their talk of honor and courage, all the Clans do now is *talk*?”

Icewing got to her paws. “I’m not going to let Harelight’s death be for nothing,” she mewed, suddenly brisk. “But we can deal with that later. For now, we need to get Mothwing to a medicine cat. Her wound’s infected. She has a fever.” She glanced out from under the halfbridge toward the moonlit shore. “We were on our way to ShadowClan to ask Puddleshine for some herbs, but a Twoleg dog chased us under here. We scared it off, but every time we try to sneak out, the other dogs go crazy. They know we’re here and they’re not going to let us escape.”

“But they’re tethered,” Nightheart told her.

“The Twolegs aren’t,” Icewing mewed. “What if they come to see what their dogs are howling about? Mothwing can’t outrun a Twoleg.”

“And if a dog breaks free, it could kill her,” Duskfur added.

Nightheart’s pelt pricked along his spine. It was true: crossing the shore was risky. But there was no other route. He began to think. They could wait until the Twolegs had disappeared into their pelt dens to sleep. But what if their dogs stayed outside? And could he guarantee they would *all* sleep through the night? He could feel the heat of Mothwing’s fever from here. They mustn’t waste any more time. The sick RiverClan medicine cat needed to be somewhere

safer and warmer than this. There was only one option. He'd have to go back into the Twoleg camp.

Ignoring the fear tugging in his belly, Nightheart lifted his chin. "I'll distract them," he mewed. "I managed to distract them earlier and I wasn't even trying." He tried to sound casual, but he knew now just how dangerous the Twoleg camp could be.

Mothwing frowned. "It's too risky."

"I've scouted the whole field. I know it well enough to avoid getting cornered." Nightheart swallowed. Could he really remember every pelt den and every gap in the Twoleg camp? He hoped so. He was faster than a Twoleg, but if a dog escaped its tether, he'd become prey.

Icewing nodded. "Okay," she mewed. "Let's try it."

The two RiverClan cats helped Mothwing to her paws. Mothwing winced, and Nightheart slid out from the halfbridge ahead of them. As moonlight washed his pelt, he looked around the lake, scanning ThunderClan's stretch of shore. He could see the tree stump Frostpaw had mentioned, but there was no sign of the RiverClan medicine-cat apprentice or Sunbeam.

"We're ready." Icewing and Duskfur steered Mothwing out of the shadows, supporting her between their shoulders.

Nightheart looked toward the Twoleg camp. The pelt dens were nearly all dark now, but a large group of Twolegs had gathered around a fire. He could hear their voices and see their dogs. They looked sleepy, settled in for the night. Perhaps he wouldn't have to distract them after all.

Suddenly a big gray dog glanced toward the halfbridge. Its eyes flashed in the darkness as it got to its paws and began to watch the shoreline as though searching for prey.

Nightheart's paws pricked. He lifted his chin. *I can do this.* "Wait here until you're certain I've got their attention," he told the RiverClan cats. "Then head down the shore." He nodded toward the forest some distance away, where a creek glittered in the moonlight as it cut across the shore and emptied into the lake. "When you reach that stream, head into the trees and follow it until it reaches the ShadowClan border. I'll catch up with you as soon as I can."

Icewing eyed him nervously. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

“Yes.” Nightheart headed away from them, toward the Twoleg field, wondering how he was going to create a big enough distraction to keep every dog in camp from noticing the three RiverClan cats. He could smell Mothwing’s blood. Could the dogs smell it too? His heart pounded as the big gray dog began to growl. Its thorn-sharp gaze latched onto him as he crossed the boundary of long grass that marked the edge of the Twoleg camp. Its growl quickened into a series of small, half-swallowed barks. Nightheart fluffed out his fur and kept walking. Climbing the slope, he moved quietly between the pelt dens, keeping to the shadows until he was close to the Twoleg fire.

Blood pulsing in his ears, he paused at the edge of the clearing. The big gray dog stood as still as stone, as though holding its breath, but its gaze was still fixed on him. *It’s waiting.* Nightheart swallowed back fear. *It wants to see what I do next.*

Bracing himself, Nightheart crossed from shadow into firelight. The dog jerked forward and burst into a frenzied howl. Its Twoleg yanked its tether as though trying to silence it, but the dog barked louder. Around the fire, the Twolegs began to turn like startled sheep. Every hair on Nightheart’s pelt was telling him to flee, but he forced himself to keep walking toward them.

The other dogs had frozen, confused, as Nightheart kept walking, getting closer and closer to the fire and the Twolegs. Then suddenly it seemed as though every dog in the camp started barking at once. They whined and yelped as they strained at their tethers. The Twolegs began getting to their hind legs as Nightheart padded into the light of the fire. Smoke whisked around him, stinging his eyes. The Twolegs turned, some pointing, others yelping in surprise. One began to pad toward him, then paused as though unsure what to do. Nightheart glared at it, and lifted his face to the sky. He let out a long, desperate yowl, then turned and ran.

The Twolegs whooped and called behind him. Their dogs howled furiously; Nightheart could picture them fighting to pull free of their tethers as he ran one way, then the other. His paws slithered over the dewy grass, and his lungs burned with the effort, but he kept running. A Twoleg loomed from a den ahead of him and he swerved, his heart leaping into his throat as he felt its bony paw brush his tail.

He pushed harder, seeing only just in time a long, thin vine stretching from a den to the ground. He leaped over it, then over another, and turned and ran downslope, past the fire, between the legs of a group of startled Twolegs. Then, zigzagging along a row of pelt dens, he began to head for the shore. A large brown dog leaped out, jaws snapping, eyes wild with rage, but its tether jerked it back; it whimpered as it lost its balance and fell onto its tail. A small white dog darted at Nightheart and tried to nip his heels, but a Twoleg swooped down and scooped it up, hugging it close and yowling like a queen protecting its kit.

Still running, Nightheart scanned the shore, relieved to see it empty. Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing must have made it clear of the Twolegs' camp. Glancing behind him, he saw Twolegs staring while their dogs howled around them.

Triumph surged in Nightheart's chest as he pounded onto the shore and clattered over the pebbles. He ran as far as the stream and caught up with Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing a little way into the forest.

"Are you okay?" he puffed as he reached them.

"We should be asking *you* that," Icewing mewed. "It sounded like you'd woken a wolf pack."

"I'm fine," Nightheart assured them. Mothwing stared at him hazily, as though she wasn't certain he was really there. "How is she?" he asked Duskfur.

"Her fever is getting worse," the she-cat told him.

"She can barely walk," Icewing added.

"I think you should rest for the night," Nightheart mewed. "We can head to the ShadowClan camp in the morning."

"But Mothwing needs help now," Duskfur pressed.

"It's still quite a walk to the camp." Nightheart looked anxiously at Mothwing's glassy gaze. "It might be too much for her. I'll fetch Frostpaw. She must be close by now. She went to look for you in the horseplace. She'll be able to patch Mothwing up."

Icewing dipped her head. "I think you're right, but will we be safe here?"

Nightheart scanned the forest. He could smell border markers, but he didn't know this stretch of woodland. The terrain was rocky

and uneven, but he felt a spark of hope when he saw a shadow on the ground ahead. He hurried toward it, pleased to find a small ravine where the forest floor opened. Ferns sprouted from its steep walls. They were browning and half shriveled by the leaf-bare cold, but they would still screen the RiverClan cats from prying eyes. The sides were sheer, easy enough for even an injured cat to scramble down but too narrow for a Twoleg or a dog to reach. Even if their trail was followed, they'd be safe down there.

He called to Duskfur. "This way!"

She darted over to him and looked down into the ravine, then nodded. "Fetch Frostpaw. I'll help Icewing make a nest down there for Mothwing."

Relief washed Nightheart's pelt as he hurried away, heading for the tree stump where Frostpaw and Sunbeam must be waiting by now. He couldn't wait to tell Frostpaw that he'd found her missing Clanmates. Suddenly there seemed hope for RiverClan, he was sure of it. There were cats free from Splashtail's grasp. They could lead a rebellion against the false leader. But only if they could persuade the other Clans to act.

Chapter 2

Sunbeam woke, at first only aware of the damp chill reaching deep into her bones. She opened her eyes and saw gentle dawn light giving color to the browning ferns, which screened the narrow gully where she and Nightheart and the RiverClan cats had spent the night. Though it was morning, cold night air still lingered around their makeshift nests.

She could hear Frostpaw. “I’ll be able to find marigold.”

“How?” Mothwing’s mew was husky but gentle, filled with warmth for her former apprentice. “It’s leaf-bare. The only marigold in the forest will be dried and stored in a medicine cat’s den.”

“I’ll find something else, then,” Frostpaw countered. “Oak leaf or goldenrod. Or I can take you to Puddleshine now.”

“We must wait for the others to wake up,” Mothwing told her.

“They should be awake already,” Frostpaw mewed loudly. She was leaning over Mothwing, just as she had been when Sunbeam had closed her eyes the night before. Had the medicine-cat apprentice slept at all?

Sunbeam sat up. They had raced here last night as soon as Nightheart had found them and told them that Mothwing was injured. Frostpaw had immediately wanted to scour the forest for herbs, but Nightheart had reminded her that they were on the border between ShadowClan and SkyClan and that Splashtail might already have sent out patrols to search for the missing RiverClan cats. It wasn’t safe to wander the woods in the dark. Was it any safer now?

“Mothwing’s right,” she told Frostpaw quietly. “We can leave once they’re awake.” She wondered whether to poke Nightheart, who was still snoring gently beside her, and rouse Duskfur and Icewing, who were curled tight in their nests. But yesterday had been hard on them all, and ShadowClan was probably still sleeping too.

“Then I’ll go look for herbs by myself,” Frostpaw mewed impatiently.

“We’re on another Clan’s territory,” Sunbeam reminded her.

“I’m a medicine cat,” Frostpaw snapped. “I’m supposed to be able to move around without getting attacked.”

Sunbeam understood her anger. The apprentice medicine cat had been in hiding for moons, and now she had watched Harelight die and heard Splashtail order her Clanmates to kill Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing. Her distress must run deep.

Wincing, Mothwing pushed herself up into a sitting position. The long wound on her shoulder was glistening with infection. “These are strange times,” she breathed softly, her gentle gaze on Frostpaw’s face. “But it won’t always be this way.”

“You don’t know that.” Frostpaw turned on her. “You need herbs *now*! You’re getting sicker. What if you d—” The gray she-cat stopped. Her eyes glistened with fear. “I’ve only just found you. I mustn’t lose you.”

“I’m tougher than you think.” Mothwing forced out a husky purr and touched her nose to Frostpaw’s cheek.

Nightheart moved beside Sunbeam, stretching out his forepaws until he shivered.

Sunbeam felt relieved. “You’re awake.” Perhaps he could reassure Frostpaw.

Icewing and Duskfur were waking too. Duskfur lifted her graying tabby head. “How’s Mothwing?”

Icewing got to her paws and shook out her damp white fur. “Is her fever better?” She turned toward the RiverClan medicine cat’s nest.

“It’s worse,” Frostpaw told her urgently. “We need to find some herbs.”

Nightheart sat up, blinking away sleep. “Puddleshine will have everything she needs.”

Mothwing’s eyes rounded anxiously. “Are we still going to the ShadowClan camp?”

“Of course,” Nightheart told her. “You said you were heading there yesterday. Tigerstar will want to hear our news.”

“I’m not sure anymore if it’s wise,” Mothwing mewed.

Sunbeam tipped her head to one side. What did Mothwing mean? “But Tigerstar will want to help.”

“I’m not sure we should burden him any more,” Mothwing mewed. “There’s enough tension between ShadowClan and RiverClan already.”

“*Some* cat has to do something about Splashtail,” Frostpaw growled.

“Eventually, yes,” Mothwing agreed. “But any action must be carefully planned. If Splashtail finds out that Tigerstar is sheltering us before the other Clans have been warned, it could be dangerous for his Clanmates.”

Sunbeam felt a prick of indignation. “Tigerstar won’t let Splashtail bully him.”

“I’m sure he won’t,” Mothwing mewed. “But is it fair to put him in that position?”

Nightheart looked thoughtful. “ShadowClan *is* a little too close to RiverClan,” he conceded. “We don’t want to trigger a war.”

“But Tigerstar might be able to come up with a peaceful solution,” Sunbeam argued.

Frostpaw’s pelt twitched angrily. “Peace? With *Splashtail*?”

“Tigerstar hasn’t been much of a peacemaker in the past,” Duskfur pointed out.

“And we can’t risk a battle before we’re ready,” Mothwing chimed.

“We should go to Tigerstar now.” Frostpaw sounded determined. “I trust him. He believed in me when no other cat would.” She shot a resentful look at Icewing.

Icewing’s fur ruffled. “*We* believed you.”

“Not until it was too late,” Frostpaw grunted.

“What else could we do?” Duskfur looked apologetic. “You broke into the middle of a Gathering and accused Splashtail of killing his Clanmates. Taking a side could have caused a fight.”

“Look where avoiding fighting has led!” Frostpaw mewed.

Icewing blinked at her. “Our Clan was a mess,” she mewed. “All we wanted was a leader who could straighten things out.”

“We wanted what was best for RiverClan,” Duskfur added.

“What was best was to get rid of Splashtail,” Frostpaw snapped.

Icewing’s eyes sparked with irritation. “We’ve been *trying* very hard to convince our Clanmates to get rid of him. Why do you think he wants us dead? You make it sound like we’ve been sitting on our tails doing nothing.”

Sunbeam took a step forward. Her heart ached to see them argue. “You’ve all been really brave.”

“You have,” Nightheart agreed. “Let’s tell Tigerstar what’s happened and let him decide for himself.”

“And if he turns us away?” Mothwing argued.

“He won’t,” Icewing mewed. “We lived with ShadowClan for moons. Harelight, too. We were like real Clanmates for a while. Tigerstar will not let Harelight’s death go unanswered.”

Sunbeam felt a flash of unease. Tigerstar was a wise and strong leader. She trusted him to protect these cats from Splashtail. But Icewing had made an important point. Tigerstar wouldn’t let Harelight’s death pass, and that might make things worse. What they needed now was a leader with a cool head. “Perhaps Mothwing’s right,” she ventured. “Perhaps it *is* unfair to throw this at Tigerstar’s paws. Let’s try ThunderClan. Squirrelstar is as determined as Tigerstar to get rid of Splashtail.”

“But only if RiverClan turns on Splashtail itself,” Frostpaw huffed.

Duskfur looked thoughtful. “But she still might be our best choice. ThunderClan is farther away. We’ll be safer there.”

“Maybe it’s *too* far away,” Nightheart argued. “The journey would be very hard on Mothwing.”

Sunbeam shifted her paws. He was right. It didn’t matter which leader would be more help to RiverClan. Mothwing was too sick to travel far. “Okay,” she mewed. “Let’s try ShadowClan.”

“Even the ShadowClan camp is still quite a way for an injured cat.” Icewing cautioned. “Mothwing shouldn’t make a wasted journey. Let’s send someone to see if Tigerstar will take us in.”

“Good idea,” Duskfur agreed. “I’ll go.”

“I know ShadowClan better.” Icewing got to her paws. “I’ll do it.”

Sunbeam realized that Nightheart was looking at her.

“Wouldn’t it be best to send a former ShadowClan cat?” he mewed.

“What?” she mewed mischievously. “Like you?”

“I failed the trials, remember?” He blinked at her fondly. “I was thinking of someone who grew up there.” He grew serious once more. “I think Icewing, Mothwing, and Duskfur should stay together.”

“I agree.” Sunbeam got to her paws. “They’ll be safer here.”

“Please be careful.” Mothwing blinked at her anxiously. “Splashtail might have sent out search patrols.”

“Sunbeam knows this territory like she knows her own pelt,” Nightheart reassured her.

“I’ll stay out of sight,” Sunbeam promised.

She leaped up the side of the gully, pushed through the shriveled ferns, and landed lightly on the forest floor. Dew and moss scents bathed her tongue, but there was no sign of patrols. As she began to head along an old, familiar trail, a jab of anxiety pricked her belly. When she’d left ShadowClan, Yarrowleaf and Whorlpelt had called her a Clan-swapper. It was a name they used to make it sound as if switching Clans was petty and selfish and something only a fox-heart would do. Her pelt twitched uneasily. Would they still be angry with her?

She pushed the thought away as the trail cut through a wall of bracken. It would take her onto the main route to the camp. As she ducked beneath the musky-smelling fronds, she heard paw steps behind her. Turning, she was surprised to see Frostpaw hurrying along the path. “Has something happened?” she asked anxiously.

“Mothwing is weaker than she lets on,” Frostpaw panted. “I wanted to tell you to please hurry. Come straight back. I don’t know how long she’ll be able to fight the infection without herbs. If Tigerstar doesn’t want us, we need to go someplace else, and we need to go fast.”

“Okay.” Sunbeam’s heart began to pound. If Frostpaw was this worried, she needed to be quick. “I’ll be as fast as I can. And I’ll make sure Tigerstar doesn’t turn you away.” Without wasting another moment, she broke into a run and began to race for the ShadowClan camp.

Sunbeam shifted on her paws as Whorlpelt stared at her. Had she made a promise to Frostpaw that she couldn’t keep? She felt a rush of hope as the gray-and-white tom turned away. “So you’ll take me to Tigerstar?”

“I’ll take you to the camp,” he mewed tersely.

She’d met Whorlpelt and Pouncestep hunting along the ditches above the camp. Whorlpelt had greeted her sourly, his mew filled with distrust as she’d told him that she needed to speak with Tigerstar as soon as possible. Pouncestep had been happier to see

her and had persuaded Whorlpelt that they should take her to the ShadowClan camp. As they followed him between the pines, the gray she-cat seemed eager to catch up on Sunbeam's gossip.

"How's Nightheart? He disappeared with Frostpaw, didn't he? Where did they go? Did you miss him? Were you scared he'd abandoned you?"

"No." Sunbeam was amused that Pouncestep was as nosy and friendly as she'd been when they'd both been ShadowClan warriors. It almost felt as though they were still Clanmates. She was relieved, though, that Pouncestep was only asking innocent questions about her mate. It would have been trickier if she'd been asking about ThunderClan's business. "I knew he'd only have gone if it was important," Sunbeam told her. "I just focused on my trials and tried not to worry."

"Were they hard?" Pouncestep blinked at her anxiously. "The trials?"

"Quite hard," Sunbeam told her. "I had to train kits."

"How in StarClan do you train kits?" Pouncestep asked in surprise. "They have thistledown for brains."

"They were very smart." Sunbeam felt suddenly protective of Stempaw, Bristlepaw, and Graypaw. They were apprentices now, and she was secretly pleased that she'd contributed to their training.

Pouncestep didn't seem to be listening. "I hope they weren't as naughty as Cinnamontail's kits. We keep having to rescue them from the trees around the camp. It's like they can't see a tree trunk without wanting to climb it. It wouldn't be so bad if they were as good at getting down as they are at getting up. Last moon, Streamkit climbed so near the top, Spireclaw had to—"

Whorlpelt interrupted. "Maybe cut the gossip before we get to camp," he grunted. "You don't want Cloverfoot to hear you telling a *ThunderClan* cat all of ShadowClan's secrets, do you?"

Pouncestep's whiskers twitched with amusement. "Kits climbing trees isn't exactly a Clan secret."

Whorlpelt grunted again but didn't argue. They'd reached the bramble entrance of the ShadowClan camp. He stopped and eyed Sunbeam. "I didn't think you'd ever want to set paw here again," he mewed reprovingly.

Sunbeam felt the sting of his words but met his gaze brightly, hoping he couldn't tell that his comment had hurt her. "This place will always be important to me," she told him. "I grew up here."

"Not important enough for you to stay, though." Whorlpelt didn't give her a chance to argue but turned his tail on her and padded into camp.

"Don't worry about him," Pouncestep whispered. "He was as worried as the rest of us about how you were managing in ThunderClan. He's just too proud to change his mind." Her eyes darkened. "It *is* okay there, isn't it?"

"I'm really happy," Sunbeam assured her old denmate.

"I'm glad."

As Pouncestep purred, Whorlpelt's mew sounded from the other side of the camp wall. "Sunbeam's here."

"Come on," Pouncestep waved Sunbeam in with her tail. "They'll want to talk to you." She looked suddenly curious. "What did you want to tell them, by the way?"

"I have news about RiverClan." Sunbeam ducked through the bramble tunnel and padded into camp.

Familiar smells washed over her, making her throat tighten. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed the scent of damp bramble and the fresh-kill pile loaded with crows and frogs and the small, dark squirrels that tasted muskier than ThunderClan squirrels. She could smell the crushed bracken nests in the dens and the thick ivy that twined its way through the camp wall, and she felt a wash of nostalgia so powerful that she barely noticed her former Clanmates staring at her.

"Sunbeam!" Cloverfoot hurried toward her. "Has something happened? Why are you here?"

Sunbeam dipped her head politely to the ShadowClan deputy. "Where's Tigerstar? I need to speak to him."

"Didn't Squirrelstar tell you? She must have been called away too, surely."

"I haven't been in camp," Sunbeam explained. What hadn't Whorlpelt or Pouncestep told her? "Why would Squirrelstar have been called away?"

“Apparently, Whistlepaw had a vision. It was important enough for Harestar to call a meeting of all the Clan leaders.”

Sunbeam felt a jolt of alarm in her chest. Did the vision have anything to do with Splashtail? Had StarClan tried to warn the Clans that he was a murderer? Why couldn’t they have done it earlier, before he’d killed Harelight?

She became aware of Cloverfoot searching her gaze. “What is it?” The ShadowClan deputy sounded alarmed. “Do you know something?”

“Sunbeam!” Fringewhisker was crossing the clear toward her. “It’s good to see you. Are you well?” The brown-and-white she-cat’s eyes were shining.

Spireclaw hurried after her. “Have you heard any news of Berryheart?”

Sunbeam stiffened. Should she tell him that their mother was deputy of RiverClan now, and that she had watched Splashtail kill Harelight without even flinching? Her throat tightened at the memory. She’d tell Tigerstar first. It would be easier. “I have to speak with Tigerstar,” she mewed.

Yarrowleaf eyed her distrustfully from outside the warriors’ den. Was she just being proud like Whorlpelt, or had she really not forgiven her for *Clan-swapping*? Gullswoop and Blazefire were staring at her eagerly, their pelts rippling as though they were pleased she’d come.

Scorchfur padded toward her, swishing his tail. “How’s ThunderClan treating you? We’ve been wondering—”

“You can chitchat later.” Cloverfoot cut him off. She hadn’t taken her eyes from Sunbeam. “What’s so urgent that you need to speak with Tigerstar?”

“It’s about RiverClan.” Sunbeam met her gaze. She remembered Frostpaw’s words. *I don’t know how much longer Mothwing can fight the infection.* There wasn’t time to waste. “When will Tigerstar be back?”

“I don’t know.” Cloverfoot confessed. “But you can tell me.”

Sunbeam hesitated. Would Cloverfoot be as sympathetic as Tigerstar to the RiverClan refugees? She had no choice. Mothwing

needed help. “Squirrelstar sent us to check on RiverClan yesterday. We saw Splashtail kill Harelight.”

Cloverfoot’s eyes widened. “His *deputy*?”

“He ordered his warriors to search for Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing and kill them on sight.”

“He’s gone crazy!” Cloverfoot sounded horrified.

“And he’s made Berryheart his new deputy.” Sunbeam glanced apologetically at Spireclaw. She knew it wasn’t her fault, but she wished she hadn’t been the one to break the news.

Her brother’s ears twitched. “What in StarClan is she doing *there*?”

Fringewhisker narrowed her eyes. “I thought she didn’t *approve* of switching Clans.” When Sunbeam had moved to ThunderClan, Berryheart had been openly furious, but for moons before that, Berryheart had scorned and criticized Fringewhisker for joining ShadowClan to be with Spireclaw. How must it feel to find out that such a self-righteously loyal warrior wasn’t above switching Clans herself?

Yarrowleaf’s pelt ruffled. “You’re mistaken.” She padded forward crossly. “Berryheart would never join another Clan!”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” Sunbeam told her.

Yarrowleaf stared back at her, dismay showing in her clear yellow eyes. Sunbeam felt a new rush of anger at her mother. Was there anyone she hadn’t betrayed? She pushed the thought away. It reached too deep into her heart and there wasn’t time. She looked back at Cloverfoot. “We’ve found Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Cloverfoot asked.

“Me and Nightheart and Frostpaw.” Sunbeam told her. “They’re on the border. Mothwing is injured.”

“Where?” Snaketooth’s mew sounded across the clearing. She was watching from beside the prey pile, ears pricked.

“Near the gully.”

Snaketooth’s eyes flashed with irritation. “And what are *we* supposed to do about it?”

Sunbeam felt a flutter of fear in her chest. If neither ShadowClan medicine cat was here, would she be able to convince the warriors to help? Would the warriors even know what medicine was needed?

“Mothwing has a nasty scratch on her shoulder,” she mewed. “It’s infected. Frostpaw is with her, but she doesn’t have any herbs to treat her.”

Snaketooth stared at her for a long moment. The flutter in Sunbeam’s chest was creeping down into her belly. Finally, the honey-brown tabby spoke. “I’ll fetch some marigold,” she grunted, turning and heading into the medicine den. “I’ve seen Puddleshine and Shadowsight use that to treat infections before.”

“Thank you,” Sunbeam purred, relieved. She turned a hopeful gaze toward Cloverfoot. “We were hoping ShadowClan would take them in—Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing,” she explained. “ShadowClan will be able to protect them from Splashtail . . .” She hesitated. “If Tigerstar agrees. Of course, we could ask Squirrelstar, but it’s a long way, and Mothwing’s injury means—”

Cloverfoot didn’t let her finish. “You don’t need to ask Squirrelstar. Of course we’ll take them in. For now, at least. Tigerstar can decide when he gets back, but I know how much he wants to help bring the old RiverClan back, and it sounds like Mothwing is in trouble. Go and fetch them.”

Sunbeam felt her heart lift as Cloverfoot nodded to Spireclaw and Fringewhisker. “You two, go with them.”

Snaketooth was hurrying across the clearing, a bundle of herbs dangling from her jaws. She was already heading for the entrance.

“I’ll start making them some nests,” Pouncestep mewed.

“I’ll get the bracken,” Yarrowleaf volunteered as Sunbeam turned to follow Puddleshine.

“We’ll make sure Splashtail doesn’t find them,” Scorchfur called after her.

Sunbeam glanced back, her heart aching with fondness for her old Clanmates. Cloverfoot was watching her anxiously.

“Thank you!” Sunbeam called to the ShadowClan deputy. “Thank you!” she called to the others, and ducked out of the camp. Although she was certain ThunderClan was where her heart now lay, she was grateful for the kindness of her old Clanmates and proud that she had been born and raised among them.

Sunbeam sat with Nightheart and Icewing at the edge of the ShadowClan camp and watched Duskfur cross the clearing to join them. “How is she?”

“Sleeping.” Duskfur sat wearily down beside Icewing.

Sunbeam pushed a sparrow toward her. “Eat this. You must be hungry. You’ve been sitting beside her nest all day.” She looked toward the medicine den, swathed now in shadow as night deepened. Mothwing was inside, stinking of herbs from the poultices Frostpaw had been applying and reapplying since they had brought the stricken medicine cat to ShadowClan. “Has her fever gone down?”

“Yes.” Duskfur looked relieved and took a bite of the sparrow.

Cloverfoot had given the patrol a sheltered corner beside the camp wall and brought them prey from the fresh-kill pile—a rabbit, two mice, a sparrow, and a frog for Sunbeam. “I thought you might have missed eating frog,” she’d whispered to Sunbeam as she laid it on the ground in front of her.

There were nests in the long grass behind them, which Pouncestep and Scorchfur had woven with the help of Flowerstem and Gullswoop. Sunbeam had tried to tell the ShadowClan deputy that they wouldn’t need nests and that she and Nightheart ought to head back to ThunderClan right away. But Cloverfoot had insisted they stay until Tigerstar came back. He would want to hear for himself what they’d seen.

Sunbeam hadn’t argued. She knew their Clanmates back in ThunderClan would be worried when they did not return, but she wasn’t ready to leave Frostpaw yet, and she guessed Nightheart wasn’t either. The young medicine-cat apprentice had been through so much. It seemed cruel to leave her alone to tell Tigerstar the horrors she’d witnessed at the RiverClan camp. And she’d had no rest. She was watching over her former mentor like a queen watching over her kit.

“Frostpaw must be hungry.” Sunbeam gazed at the medicine den.

“She promised she’d join us to eat,” Duskfur told her.

Nightheart looked up. “Should I fetch her?” He’d already finished his share of the rabbit and was washing.

As he spoke, a small shape showed at the entrance of the medicine den. Frostpaw slid out and padded toward them, looking anxiously over her shoulder.

“We saved you the mouse.” Sunbeam nudged it toward her.

“Don’t say you’re not hungry,” Duskfur warned. “You haven’t eaten all day.”

“If Mothwing’s fever is going down,” Icewing commented, “she won’t need so much care. Rest will be enough for her.”

“She shouldn’t be on her own.” Frostpaw sat down and began to pluck irritably at the mouse with her teeth.

Sunbeam felt a pang of pity for Frostpaw. “She isn’t,” she mewed gently. “We’re all here.”

“And she’ll be better in no time now that she’s had some marigold,” Duskfur added.

Frostpaw grunted. “Then what? She has nowhere to go. None of us do. We’re Clanless.”

“No, we’re not,” Icewing mewed sternly. “RiverClan is in trouble right now. But we’re going to find a way to save it.”

Duskfur looked wistful. “I don’t understand how it could have changed so much. Mistystar must be horrified to see what’s happened.” Her eyes glistened with grief. “Whoever thought RiverClan cats would turn on one another?” She seemed suddenly helpless. “How could a *RiverClan* warrior be so greedy for power, and so ruthless?”

Frostpaw eyed her sharply. “Do you mean Curlfeather?”

“Of course she doesn’t!” Icewing gave her a warning glance. “Curlfeather was her *daughter*.”

“I meant Splashtail,” Duskfur explained quickly.

“But Curlfeather was part of it.” There was bitterness in Frostpaw’s mew. Was she angry at Curlfeather for helping Splashtail become leader of RiverClan, or at Duskfur because she didn’t seem able to admit her daughter’s responsibility for everything that had happened?

Sunbeam swallowed back sadness. It must be hard for both Frostpaw *and* Duskfur, but she knew more keenly how much it hurt to have a treacherous mother—to be a traitor’s kit, to love someone who’d behaved so badly.

Frostpaw pushed the mouse away and looked pointedly at Duskfur's sparrow. "I don't know how you can eat when your Clanmates are suffering."

Icewing's tail flicked. "I know you're upset, Frostpaw. We all are. But there's no need to be rude to your elder. Duskfur is perfectly entitled to eat. She *needs* to eat, and you do too."

Sunbeam saw hurt gleam in Frostpaw's deep blue eyes. Couldn't Icewing be gentler?

"She shouldn't have brought up Curlfeather," Frostpaw muttered.

"She didn't," Icewing snapped.

Duskfur's eyes rounded in alarm. "Can't we get along? We're all on the same side."

"Then stop going on about RiverClan having changed," Frostpaw growled. "I tried to stop it. I tried to warn you and you did nothing!"

"We didn't do *nothing*," Icewing hissed. "We've been risking our lives trying to persuade our Clanmates to get rid of Splashtail."

"You wouldn't have had to if you'd *believed* me in the first place," Frostpaw hissed back. "Why couldn't you have just accepted what I said and chased Splashtail out instead of making him leader? If you had done that, Harelight wouldn't be *dead* now." Her mew seemed to catch in her throat, and she got to her paws and padded away.

Sunbeam's pelt prickled with distress. She hated seeing Frostpaw suffer.

Nightheart scrambled to his paws.

"Wait." Icewing stood up and waved him away with her tail. She was watching Frostpaw cross the moonlit clearing. "I'll talk to her."

Sunbeam eyed the white warrior in alarm. Tempers were so high between the RiverClan cats. "Won't you just make it worse? It sounds like she blames you right now."

Icewing hadn't taken her gaze from Frostpaw. "I'd rather she blame me than herself," she mewed.

Sunbeam watched her follow Frostpaw across the clearing as Nightheart settled back down beside her. She felt a tightness in her chest where her heart ached for the two cats. "It's true that Frostpaw probably blames herself as much as she blames Icewing," she murmured.

Nightheart shifted beside her. "Probably more."

“Perhaps *you should* talk to her,” Sunbeam suggested. “You grew so close on your journey.”

“What would I say to her? That it’s no one’s fault but Splashtail’s?” He looked at Sunbeam. “Icewing’s probably doing that already.” The white warrior had caught up to Frostpaw, and the two cats were talking quietly. Frostpaw’s head was low, her tail limp.

Nightheart went on. “I think Squirrelstar is right,” he mewed heavily. “It’s up to RiverClan to sort out its own problems.”

“We can help, though,” Sunbeam mewed.

“Yes,” Nightheart agreed. “But unless the change comes from within RiverClan, it’ll never stick.”

Sunbeam watched Frostpaw and Icewing, still worried by how angry they’d been. It was as though the whole of RiverClan had forgotten what it was to be Clanmates. *Can a Clan that has turned on itself ever truly recover?*

Chapter 3

Frostpaw shifted in her nest, then shifted again. If she couldn't sleep, perhaps she should just get up. ShadowClan was still asleep, the clearing swathed in darkness. But an early-morning mist was curling around the bramble dens, and dawn light was filtering through the trees at last.

And yet Frostpaw didn't *want* to get up. Icewing's words still pricked at her. Did Icewing really think this was all Splashtail's fault? *If only I'd been able to convince them.* Frostpaw's fur itched with frustration. *If only they'd been willing to believe me. If only StarClan had backed me up with a sign or by sending a dream.*

Anger surged in her chest, and she sat up. She knew that wishing things were different was a waste of time. *What has happened can't be changed.* Icewing had been right about *that*. Harelight was dead, and Splashtail was still leader of RiverClan.

She screwed her eyes shut, as though she could blot out the image of Harelight falling at Splashtail's paws, of the gash opening his throat, of his blood spilling across the RiverClan camp. She sat up, shaking. She needed to fix RiverClan before any more cats died.

Birds were beginning to chatter in the trees. Before long, the whole forest would echo with their song. Her nest was damp, and the long grass around her drooped, heavy with dew. Sunbeam and Nightheart were still curled in their nests, and Duskfur and Icewing slept a few muzzle-lengths away. She was glad they hadn't had to sleep in the stuffy warriors' den. She'd spent too many nights in the medicine cat den already; her fur was beginning to smell like a ShadowClan cat's. This nest in the grass felt temporary, and she liked it that way. The thought of spending the rest of her life as a refugee in the ShadowClan camp filled her with gloom.

She gazed toward the medicine den hidden in shadow. How was Mothwing? Had she slept well? Voices caught her ear and she turned, surprised to see Tigerstar, Puddleshine, and Shadowsight talking softly but urgently to Cloverfoot on the other side of the clearing. *He's back!* She felt a rush of hope. Tigerstar would *have* to act once he knew what Splashtail had done. He could persuade

Squirrelstar and Harestar of how dangerous it would be to delay any longer. The Clans could move on Splashtail at last.

She nosed her way quickly from the long grass and crossed the camp. “Tigerstar, I need to talk to you about what’s happening in RiverClan.”

He turned as she spoke, eyes widening at her words.

Didn’t he know what had happened? “Haven’t you told him?” she asked Cloverfoot, a prickle of impatience in her pelt.

“There hasn’t been a chance,” Cloverfoot explained. “Whistlepaw’s vision—”

Tigerstar interrupted her. “Tell me what?”

“Splashtail killed Harelight,” Frostpaw mewed, her heart thumping. “Berryheart has joined RiverClan as his deputy. He’s ordered his warriors to kill Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing.”

Alarm sparked in Tigerstar’s eyes. “Where are they now?”

“Here,” Frostpaw told him. “They ran away after Splashtail caught them asking Harelight to turn on him.”

“Is that why he killed Harelight?”

Frostpaw stared at him. “I don’t know.” Why did Splashtail do anything? She could feel herself trembling. Repeating the events seemed to make them more real. “He’s crazy. We have to stop him before more cats die.”

“Tigerstar.” Icewing’s mew made Frostpaw turn. The snow-white she-cat was crossing the clearing, her pelt glowing in the pale dawn light. “You’re back. What happened at the emergency Gathering?”

Frostpaw’s heart quickened. Of course! Whistlepaw’s vision! Had StarClan finally sent news that could help RiverClan?

Tigerstar’s gaze flitted over the white warrior’s pelt. “Are you okay? Frostpaw’s been telling me what happened.”

“I’m fine,” Icewing told him. “Mothwing is injured, but we brought her here for treatment. She’s going to be okay. What did Whistlepaw say? Cloverfoot said it was urgent enough to summon all the leaders.”

“It was troubling,” Tigerstar mewed. “The Clans must send a patrol.”

Frostpaw leaned forward eagerly. “Against Splashtail?”

Tigerstar blinked at her. “The vision wasn’t about RiverClan,” he mewed gently. “It was something else.”

Frostpaw felt a rush of shock as though she’d been swiped across the muzzle. How could StarClan have sent a vision about something else? Was Riverstar the only StarClan cat who cared about RiverClan? “What else could be important to the Clans right now?”

“I know you’re upset.” Tigerstar held her gaze. “A lot has happened. I know how hard it is to see your Clanmates suffering. RiverClan’s future *is* important, and we’re going to keep trying to fix your Clan. But this must be important too or StarClan wouldn’t have sent a vision.”

Frostpaw stared back at him wordlessly. Couldn’t Whistlepaw’s vision *wait*? RiverClan was falling apart right in front of them.

Icewing looked at Tigerstar. “What was the vision about?”

Frostpaw could hardly believe her ears. Was she actually *interested*?

“We’re not sure.” As Tigerstar calmly met the white warrior’s gaze, Frostpaw felt panic rising in her chest. Were the Clans going to let themselves be distracted? She wanted to wail, but she pressed the feeling back as Tigerstar went on.

“It seems the Clans owe someone a debt. We don’t know who, but we need to send a patrol along with Whistlepaw to find out. Dovewing has already joined it. Warriors from ThunderClan and SkyClan are joining her right now.”

“Who will represent RiverClan?” Cloverfoot asked.

Who cares? Frostpaw dug her claws into the ground.

“We don’t know,” Tigerstar answered. “Splashtail won’t have anything to do with us.”

Of course he won’t!

“I’ll go.”

Icewing’s mew sent fresh panic sparking in Frostpaw’s chest. “What do you mean, *go*? You can’t! RiverClan needs you *here*!”

Icewing looked at her helplessly. “What can I do here?” she asked. “If Splashtail’s warriors see me, they’ll kill me. I’ll be more use on the quest.”

“Mothwing and Duskfur are in danger too, but they’re not running off on some mouse-brained expedition,” Frostpaw snapped. “Are you too scared to stay?”

“No.” Icewing took a breath and gazed solemnly at Frostpaw. “But I know *you* are. And I’m not surprised. You’ve been through more than any cat should, and you feel responsible for what’s happened.”

“I *am* responsible.”

“Splashtail is the only cat responsible for what’s happened to RiverClan,” Icewing told her.

“What about my false dreams from StarClan?” Guilt sat like a rock in Frostpaw’s belly.

“Curlfeather used you and lied to you. She led you down a path she knew was false.”

“I should have realized sooner!”

“How could you? You were trying to be a good daughter and a good Clanmate. You are not responsible for your mother’s choices,” Icewing told her firmly. “You’ve been more hurt by them than anyone.” She held Frostpaw’s gaze. “But there are a lot of cats here who are ready and willing to help you. Whatever Whistlepaw dreamed, it’s important enough to call us away. I’m not running from Splashtail. But if I’m gone, I will be one less thing for you to worry about.” She looked at the ShadowClan leader. “I trust Tigerstar to help you and give you all the support you need.” Tigerstar nodded. Icewing glanced over her shoulder. “And Nightheart and Sunbeam won’t let you down.”

Sunbeam was still sleeping, but Nightheart had sat up in his nest and was watching across the clearing. He blinked reassuringly at Frostpaw. Could he hear what they were saying? He looked so calm.

Frostpaw stared back at him, feeling like a kit in the middle of a battle. Didn’t he realize that everything was falling apart and that the cats who could fix it were just talking and talking? She felt dizzy, her thoughts spiraling. Then she felt Icewing’s tail run down her spine.

“I have faith in you, Frostpaw,” the white warrior told her. “We all do. You’ve been so brave and achieved so much already. Just trust yourself. You have what it takes to defeat Splashtail and bring back the real RiverClan.”

Frostpaw looked at her. Icewing's blue eyes brimmed with so much warmth that her heart began to slow. "Really?"

"Really," Icewing told her.

She felt her fur begin to smooth and hope flicker once more in her belly. Taking a breath, she dipped her head. "I'll do my best."

"Your best will be plenty," Icewing told her.

Tigerstar glanced up. The sun was lifting beyond the trees. "You'd better hurry," he told Icewing. "Whistlepaw and the others are probably already at the Moonpool."

"Where are they heading?" Icewing asked him. "In case I miss them."

"Toward the mountains." He looked thoughtful for a moment, as though trying to recall a conversation; then his gaze snapped back to Icewing. "They're looking for a peak shaped like a fox head," he told her.

"Okay." Before she turned away, Icewing touched her muzzle to Frostpaw's head. "You can do this."

Across the clearing, Duskfur sat up in her nest, her eyes bleary with sleep. Her gaze sharpened as she saw Icewing disappearing through the bramble tunnel. She nosed her way from the long grass and hurried toward Frostpaw. "Where's she going?"

Tigerstar answered. "She has an important mission with the other Clans," he mewed. "She'll be back in a few days." He whisked his tail. "Right now, we have to decide what to do about Splashtail."

At last. Frostpaw's heart quickened.

"After what Splashtail did yesterday," Tigerstar went on, "the other Clans can't make any more excuses. They'll have to act. I'll go and see them and convince them that we have to move now, before any more cats die."

Cloverfoot looked alarmed. "You need to rest," she told Tigerstar. "You've only just gotten back. You must be exhausted."

"This can't wait," Tigerstar insisted. "There's a crazy cat on our border. We can't risk letting him make the first move."

Frostpaw nodded eagerly. Her thoughts were racing ahead, and hope fluttered like a bird in her chest. If all the Clans joined together, Splashtail might be gone by sundown. RiverClan could start rebuilding itself.

Tigerstar lifted his tail. “I’ll go to SkyClan first. Leafstar will have to listen—”

Before he could finish, the camp entrance shivered. Frostpaw jerked her gaze toward it. Was Icewing coming back? She felt a jab of disappointment as Blazefire and Gullswoop padded into the clearing. It was only the dawn patrol. But another scent whisked into camp after them. Frostpaw stiffened as it touched her nose. Her belly tightened. *Berryheart!* The new RiverClan deputy had followed the ShadowClan warriors into camp along with Brackenpelt.

The two cats looked badly beaten, with tufts of fur sticking out, and blood staining their pelts. Berryheart had a scratch above one eye, and the tip of Brackenpelt’s ear was torn. Had Splashtail turned on his new deputy already? *Why?* And Brackenpelt had been one of his most loyal followers.

As Berryheart saw Tigerstar, she dropped to her belly. “Don’t hurt us, please,” she begged.

Brackenpelt crouched, her tail quivering. “We need help.”

Tigerstar stiffened in surprise. “What’s happened?”

“RiverClan has turned on Splashtail,” Berryheart told him. “They’ve driven him out.”

Frostpaw’s breath caught in her throat. This was the news she’d been longing for, but now that it had come, and she saw the blood on Brackenpelt’s fur, she could only think of the other cats who must be hurt.

She hurried after Tigerstar as he crossed the clearing. “How long ago did this happen?” he asked.

“Before dawn,” Berryheart whimpered.

“And you helped the cats who turned on him?” Tigerstar eyed his former Clanmate warily.

“Of course!” she wailed. “Splashtail’s crazy.”

“Then why did you agree to become his deputy?” There was hardness in Tigerstar’s mew.

“It seemed the best way to help RiverClan,” Berryheart mewed.

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes. “Are you so loyal to your new Clan already?”

“They took me in.” She looked up at him. “There’s no longer a place for me here. RiverClan is my last chance to be a warrior.”

Puddleshine looked out from his den, his nose twitching. Had he smelled blood? He saw Berryheart and Brackenpelt and hurried over. Padding around them, he sniffed at their wounds.

“Berryheart!” Sunbeam’s cry made Frostpaw jump. The commotion must have woken her. She came running across the clearing, her eyes flashing with alarm. “You’re hurt!”

“The wounds aren’t deep,” Puddleshine told her. “But I’ll need to treat them to make sure they don’t get infected.”

Sunbeam crouched beside her mother. “Who did this?”

“RiverClan has driven Splashtail out.” Berryheart looked at her with wide, frightened eyes. “It was a terrible battle. The camp has been destroyed, and there are many injured warriors.” She looked back at Tigerstar. “Podlight can’t manage by himself. He’s overwhelmed.”

“Of course he can’t manage.” Frostpaw felt a surge of anger. Splashtail had only named Podlight as his medicine cat because the gray-and-white tom was willing to back up his claim to be the only warrior who could lead RiverClan. “He’s not a real medicine cat.”

“I’m going to get herbs.” Puddleshine headed for his den. “I have to help him.”

“RiverClan needs more than a medicine cat,” Brackenpelt mewed urgently. “The dens were torn apart in the fighting. There’s no shelter for the injured. Havenpelt and her kits don’t even have a nest.”

Shock pulsed beneath Frostpaw’s pelt. She’d wanted Splashtail gone, but not like this. “Was anyone killed?” Her mouth grew dry.

“Not that I know of, but Mallownose is bleeding so badly that Podlight thinks he might die if he doesn’t get help soon.”

Tigerstar’s tail was lashing. “This is what happens when the Clans refuse to act. I’ve been trying to warn the others all along that RiverClan needed help. No one listened to me! They should have!”

“Please do something,” Berryheart begged.

Sunbeam touched her muzzle to her mother’s ear. “We’ll help them, I promise. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to fix everything.”

“Where’s Splashtail now?” Tigerstar demanded.

“He’s crossed the border,” Berryheart told him. “We think he’s heading for the horseplace.” She struggled to her paws. “Good

riddance to him. He was a fox-heart.” She looked up at Tigerstar desperately. “You have to help us.”

“We will.” Tigerstar glanced toward the warriors’ den.

“What’s going on?” Lightleap was already awake and at the entrance.

Whorlpelt nosed past her. “What’s happened?”

“RiverClan has driven outSplashtail,” Tigerstar told them. “I want you, Gullswoop, Lightleap, and Stonewing to come with me and Puddleshine. There are a lot of injured warriors and the dens have been destroyed. We need to secure their camp and help the wounded.”

Frostpaw’s heart was pounding. She needed to see the mess Splashtail had left and help fix it.

Puddleshine ducked out of the medicine den with a bundle of herbs dangling from his jaws. He headed for the camp entrance.

Sunbeam looked at him in alarm. “What about Berryheart’s injuries?”

“Shadowsight can see to them,” Puddleshine told her. He glanced at Tigerstar. “We need to leave now. Mallownose might be dying.”

Berryheart struggled to her paws. “I should go with you,” she told Puddleshine. “RiverClan will need their deputy.”

Sunbeam gasped. “But you’re wounded!”

Tigerstar looked at Berryheart. “Are you sure you can travel? You look pretty beat up.”

Berryheart’s eyes glittered fiercely. “I’m not going to let another cat destroy my Clan.”

Frostpaw felt a flicker of admiration for the battered warrior. She must be remembering Darktail, the rogue leader who’d nearly destroyed ShadowClan.

Tigerstar began to hurry away, signaling to his patrol with a flick of his tail.

Frostpaw raced after him. “I’m coming too,” she mewed.

“Good.” He glanced back at her and nodded. “Your Clan needs you.”

Frostpaw was out of breath by the time they reached the lake. As the patrol followed the shore toward RiverClan territory, Tigerstar pushed

the pace, leading it fast across the pebbles. He made no allowances for Berryheart, who'd started out the journey limping but now seemed to have found a second wind. The former ShadowClan she-cat even began to pull ahead as they crossed onto RiverClan's shore, her gaze always on the thick reeds that hid the RiverClan camp.

Frostpaw fought to keep up, the stones cracking beneath her paws. As they neared the reed bed, a tom raced out and ran toward the patrol. Frostpaw recognized Gorseclaw's thick white fur as the warrior neared them.

Berryheart pulled up as Gorseclaw reached her. Tigerstar, Puddleshine, and Whorlpelt stopped beside her as Lightleap, Stonewing, and Gullswoop eased to a halt.

Frostpaw caught up. "How's RiverClan?"

"Not good," Gorseclaw mewed darkly, but his gaze had flitted down the shore. "Splashtail's escaped to the island."

Frostpaw jerked her muzzle toward it. The small island, ringed with trees, looked peaceful in the still water. An early-morning mist was drifting over it. There was no sign of Splashtail. "I thought he was heading for the horseplace."

"He must have changed plans." Berryheart looked worried. "Perhaps he thinks no cat would look for him there."

Tigerstar frowned. "Or perhaps he thinks it's the easiest place to defend. The tree-bridge is the only way on and off."

"Not for RiverClan cats," Frostpaw mewed.

"Splashtail can swim," Whorlpelt warned. "He doesn't need the tree-bridge. Once he's rested and seen to his wounds, he could go anywhere. This might be the last chance for us to capture him."

"There's no time." Berryheart was pacing, looking anxiously toward the reed bed. "RiverClan needs us."

"Let's worry about Splashtail later," Puddleshine agreed.

Frostpaw's pelt sparked with panic. The thought that Splashtail might escape and still be out there in the forest terrified her. "Wouldn't it be better to capture him now?"

"He's alone," Whorlpelt mewed.

"And injured," Lightleap added. She looked at Gorseclaw. "He *is* injured, right?"

“Yeah, badly.” Gorseclaw gave a firm nod.

“It’ll never be easier than this,” Whorlpelt pressed.

“I say we take him prisoner while we have the chance,” Lightleap mewed.

“And do what with him?” Puddleshine looked at them. “Kill him?”

Berryheart curled her lip. “It would stop him from hurting any more cats.”

“We’re not killing anyone,” Tigerstar mewed sternly. “But it would be better to know exactly where he is while RiverClan is finding its paws.”

Berryheart whisked her tail. “This is wasting time,” she mewed. “Let’s forget about Splashtail. RiverClan needs us.”

Tigerstar glanced at her sharply. “Do you *want* him to escape?”

“Of course not,” Berryheart mewed. “He tried to kill me. But Mallownose is bleeding to death, remember?”

Tigerstar lifted his tail. “Puddleshine, go to the RiverClan camp with Gorseclaw and Berryheart.” He looked toward the island. “The rest of us are going to catch Splashtail.”

“But we need warriors in the camp,” Berryheart protested. “It’s a mess. We need to rebuild—”

Tigerstar cut her off. “We can rebuild later,” he growled. “If we miss this chance and Splashtail hurts another cat, I will never forgive myself.” He turned his head. “Frostpaw!”

She pricked her ears as his fierce amber gaze swung toward her. “Go and help Puddleshine.” He signaled to his warriors with his tail. “Gullswoop, Lightleap, Stonewing, Whorlpelt. You’re with me.”

“No!” Frustration burst in Frostpaw’s chest. “Splashtail has put me through too much. I want to see him captured. I need to know that he’ll never hurt anyone again.”

“I think we owe her that much, Tigerstar.” Puddleshine looked at the ShadowClan leader. “Besides, Splashtail is wounded. He’ll need a medicine cat.”

Frostpaw swallowed back horror at the thought of tending to Splashtail’s wounds. After everything he’d done, she was supposed to look after him? She pushed the thought away. *You’re a medicine-cat apprentice,* she told herself. *You can’t choose who you treat.*

“I can manage at the camp for now.” Puddleshine was still looking at Tigerstar. “Frostpaw can join me once you’ve dealt with Splashtail.”

“Okay.” Tigerstar seemed doubtful but he nodded to Frostpaw. “You can come, but stay out of the way. I don’t want you getting hurt. I can’t imagine Splashtail giving up easily.”

Frostpaw nodded.

“I’ll come, too.” Berryheart looked toward the island. “I’d like to see that fox-heart captured.”

Puddleshine began to head for the reeds, glancing back at Gorseclaw. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll catch up,” Gorseclaw told him. “I want to help Tigerstar.”

The ShadowClan leader was already heading for the island. Frostpaw hurried after him as the patrol fell in behind. Her claws itched. Splashtail was a murderer who’d nearly destroyed his own Clan. He should answer for the things he’d done.

As the patrol reached the tree-bridge, she glanced back to see Berryheart and Gorseclaw trailing behind. “Hurry up!” Surely they didn’t want to miss seeing Splashtail’s expression when he realized he was surrounded.

The shore here was rocky, forming a steep bank that dropped into the lake, and the water swirled, deep and murky, beneath the bridge.

“Stay close behind,” Tigerstar mewed as he hopped onto it.

Whorlpelt jumped up after him and, one by one, the rest of the patrol followed. Frostpaw leaped up last and glanced back again. Berryheart and Gorseclaw had stopped on the shore.

“Aren’t you coming?” Frostpaw called. She was puzzled. Why were they hanging back? “I thought you wanted to see—”

A shape exploded from the water beneath her. Shock seemed to split her heart open as a huge tom burst out of the lake. Spray hit her like a flock of birds, and she stumbled back, her hind paws slipping out from under her. She thumped onto her belly, slid from the bridge, and plunged into the water.

Sinking into the ice-cold lake, she froze for a moment, the breath knocked out of her. Then her mind whirled. Panic jerked her into action and she fought for the surface. What was happening? Was it

Splashtail? She broke into the air, her eyes stinging. As her vision cleared, she saw Berryheart standing on the rocks with Gorseclaw.

She called to them, treading water, catching her breath. “Splashtail’s trying to escape.” They had to cut him off before he could climb the bank. Then she stiffened. Brackenpelt was with them. Wasn’t she supposed to be in the ShadowClan camp?

She glanced back at the tree-bridge, alarm sparking through her pelt. The lake beneath it was churning as more cats burst out of the water.

Tigerstar, Whorlpelt, and the others had bunched close on the bridge, their fur spiking, their eyes wide with shock.

“Help them!” Frostpaw called to Berryheart. She reached for the bank, her panic turning to horror as Berryheart lashed out at her. Gorseclaw leaned down beside her and swiped at Frostpaw’s muzzle. Frostpaw pushed back out into the water, her heart dropping like a stone in her chest as she realized what was happening.

It’s a trap! Berryheart had lured Tigerstar here so that Splashtail’s warriors could attack him! She turned and swam for the safety of the island. Blood roared in her ears as she hauled herself onto the shore.

Whorlpelt was gripping onto the bridge as Lizardtail hung from him, his tail in the water, his claws hooked into the gray-and-white tom’s hindquarters. Lightleap wobbled on the slippery trunk as she tried to bat him away.

“It’s an ambush!” Tigerstar swiped at Minnowtail, who had leaped like a salmon from the water and closed her jaws around the ShadowClan leader’s hind leg. He yowled at Stonewing, who was nearest the rocky shore. “Get help!”

But the white tom’s way was blocked. Nightsky had leaped onto the far end of the bridge and was advancing on Stonewing, her eyes sharp with threat.

Frostpaw watched in horror. How could the ShadowClan cats fight when they were crowded in the middle of the bridge, deep water churning below? They couldn’t swim. If they fell, they could drown! Her breath caught as she watched Nightsky lunge for Stonewing. He tried to block her blow, but it sent him staggering backward. The ShadowClan warrior barely kept his balance. He was still steadying

himself when Nightsky came at him again with a flurry of blows that pushed him back into his Clanmates. He stumbled over Whorlpelt, who was struggling to kick his way free of Lizardtail's grip. Tigerstar fought to keep from falling as Minnowtail dragged at his hind leg.

I have to help! Frostpaw leaped onto the tree-bridge and threw herself at Minnowtail. She wrapped her paws around the dark gray-and-white she-cat, hauling her off Tigerstar and plunging with her into the water. As she sank beneath the surface, Frostpaw let go, turned as fast as a fish, and swam away, back to the island and onto dry land.

Her thoughts raced. If this was a trap, what had happened to Puddleshine? He was alone in the RiverClan camp. If Berryheart had lied and Splashtail was still in charge, the medicine cat would be in danger.

"Push them back onto the island!" Berryheart yowled from the bank.

At her command, Brackenpelt leaped up beside Nightsky. Shoulder to shoulder, they advanced on the ShadowClan warriors.

Frostpaw saw rage burning in Stonewing's eyes. He leaped at Brackenpelt and Nightsky with a hiss. Brackenpelt reared to meet his attack, hooked her paws into the tom's snowy fur, and heaved him into the water below.

"Stonewing!" Lightleap gasped in terror as her Clanmate disappeared.

"You fox-hearts!" Whorlpelt lunged at Nightsky. She dodged and he slipped. As his paws thumped clumsily down beside her, she shoved him with all her might. He lost his grip and, paws flailing, plummeted into the lake.

Diving, Frostpaw swam for the two ShadowClan warriors. She could see Stonewing's white fur like smoke in the murky water and made for him, her chest burning with the effort. When she reached him, she grabbed his scruff between her jaws, then hauled him to the surface, blinking away water as she burst into the air and began dragging him toward the island. She could see Berryheart, Minnowtail, and Lizardtail lined up on the rocks. They were aiming swipes at Whorlpelt, who'd surfaced and was trying to reach for the

bank. Each time his paw touched a rock, they drove him back with a blizzard of claws.

Tigerstar, Gullswoop, and Lightleap were still trapped on the bridge, their way blocked by Nightsky and Gorseclaw.

Frostpaw swam harder, her neck aching from the weight of Stonewing. She felt a rush of relief as her paws touched the pebbles and she began to drag the ShadowClan warrior onto the shore. He struggled to find his balance, his eyes streaming.

“Are you okay?” Frostpaw stared at him frantically as he gasped and spluttered.

He nodded between coughs and dropped into a crouch, retching.

Frostpaw waded back into the water. Whorlpelt was still trying to grab for the rocks, but she could see his attempts becoming weaker and more desperate each time the RiverClan cats drove him back. He sank beneath the surface and fought his way back up, coughing.

“Help him!” Frostpaw screeched across the water, but Berryheart and Gorseclaw only crowed as he sank once again.

Anger surged in Frostpaw’s chest. How could her Clanmates be so cruel? What had Splashtail done to them to make them behave like foxes? She swam hard, ducking under the tree-bridge, and made for Whorlpelt. She reached him as he sank for a third time, grabbed him with her forepaws, and pulled him up into fresh air. Above the surface he gasped, struggling in panic. His eyes sparked with relief as he recognized Frostpaw.

“Grab my scruff,” she told him, turning to tread water until she felt his teeth gently grip the back of her neck. Steadily, she began to pull him toward the island, ignoring the scornful yowls of Berryheart and Gorseclaw.

“That’s what you get for following Tigerstar!” Berryheart jeered.

“ShadowClan cats swim like stones!” Gorseclaw mocked.

They’ve just never had a chance to learn! Frostpaw wanted to yowl back, but she focused on keeping Whorlpelt’s muzzle above water.

Tigerstar, Lightleap, and Gullswoop were on the shore ahead of her, crowding around Stonewing, who was still coughing up water. As Frostpaw scrambled onto dry land, Whorlpelt let go and stumbled out beside her.

“Traitor!” he spluttered to Berryheart on the far shore.

But Berryheart had already turned away. She flicked her tail toward Nightsky, who jumped down from the bridge at her signal.

Are they leaving? Frostpaw’s heart quickened. She hoped so. They needed to get off the island and find Puddleshine. She looked eagerly at Tigerstar, but the ShadowClan leader was staring grimly at the tree-bridge. Frostpaw’s heart sank as she saw Gorseclaw jump up beside Brackenpelt. They sat down and stared blankly ahead, like two stones blocking the way.

Frostpaw felt a pelt brush hers. “Thank you for saving our Clanmates.” Lightleap blinked gratefully at her.

“I’m glad you were with us,” Stonewing added, his mew hoarse from coughing. He looked at Whorlpelt with relief in his gaze, and Frostpaw remembered that they were father and son.

Gullswoop’s pelt was rippling along her spine. She glared at Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt on the bridge. “What’s the point of trapping us?”

Tigerstar didn’t speak. He was frozen, his eyes wide, clearly still shocked by Berryheart’s treachery.

“Do you think they have a plan?” Gullswoop pressed.

“Why keep us here?” Whorlpelt chimed.

“I don’t know.” Tigerstar’s attention suddenly shifted toward the far shore. His shoulders hardened and he gave a low, angry growl. “But I think this is just the start.”

Frostpaw stiffened. She followed his gaze, her heart sinking as she saw Berryheart, Minnowtail, Nightsky, and Lizardtail racing toward the pines.

“Splashtail has planned this very carefully.” The ShadowClan leader’s tail was flicking ominously. “And I think things are about to get very bad for ShadowClan.”

Chapter 4

Nightheart leaned back against the soft grass and watched Cinnamontail's kits race around the clearing. Streamkit streaked ahead of her littermates. The gray tabby she-kit was small but quick. The others tore after her, their tails fluffed out with excitement, squealing for her to slow down.

Nightheart nudged Sunbeam. "She's faster than a WindClan cat," he mewed. "She'll make a fine apprentice."

Sunbeam purred. "Her mother's a good runner too. She must have inherited it." Sunbeam had been in a good mood since Berryheart had arrived earlier that morning. Even though her mother was wounded, the wounds weren't deep, and, more importantly, Berryheart had turned on Splashtail. It must have been a brave thing to do. And, despite her injuries, she'd gone with Tigerstar to help clear up Splashtail's mess. Sunbeam was sure Berryheart had finally become more like her old self, the one Sunbeam had grown up with, and even wondered hopefully if she'd ask Tigerstar to take her back into ShadowClan.

Outside the elders' den, Oakfur was washing. He looked up with a start as Streamkit leaped over his tail, skimming it by a whisker. He snatched it quickly out of the way before her littermates reached him, but, as they charged noisily past, a purr rolled in the old tom's throat. "ShadowClan won't go hungry once these four become warriors."

Around the clearing, ShadowClan shared leftovers from the fresh-kill pile. The border patrol would be back soon with prey. For now, Scorchfur and Snowbird seemed happy gnawing a dried-up rabbit ear while Blazefire shared a stale thrush with Pouncestep.

Nightheart's belly growled with hunger.

"Why don't you eat that?" Sunbeam nodded toward a stiff mouse on the fresh-kill pile.

"It feels wrong to take food from ShadowClan," Nightheart told her. *Especially when it's a chewy old mouse.*

Tigerstar had asked them to stay in the ShadowClan camp while he was away with his strongest warriors. Until he'd seen with his own eyes that Splashtail had been driven out, he was wary of leaving his

own Clan vulnerable. There were kits in camp—not just Cinnamontail's, but his own.

Sunbeam gazed at the mouse. "It probably tastes better than it looks," she mewed hopefully.

"I can wait," Nightheart told her. "We'll be home soon."

"Do you think?" Sunbeam looked at him in surprise. "It sounded like there was going to be plenty for Tigerstar to do at the RiverClan camp."

Nightheart's pelt twitched. "I bet he'll be back as soon as Puddleshine has patched up the wounded."

"Won't they need to help RiverClan rebuild the camp?"

"RiverClan will want to sort out Splashtail's mess by themselves," Nightheart guessed. "They've had enough of ShadowClan's interfering."

Sunbeam lifted her chin. "ShadowClan has only ever tried to help," she mewed stiffly.

"I know." Nightheart blinked at her apologetically. He hadn't meant to sound critical of her former Clan. "I just want to go home. Our Clanmates will be worried about us."

Sunbeam blinked back. "They'll know we're okay." But he could see she was concerned too.

"I guess I should be worrying about RiverClan, not ThunderClan," he mewed. "Splashtail must have left a lot of damage behind him."

Sunbeam glanced toward the camp entrance, her gaze darkening. "I wonder how Frostpaw's doing."

Nightheart felt a pang of sadness. Frostpaw had been helpless for moons, unable to protect the cats she loved. "Seeing her Clanmates wounded will be hard on her," he mewed. "But at least RiverClan can finally start getting back to normal."

Across the clearing, Duskfur got to her paws. The brown tabby warrior had been sitting outside the medicine den since Shadowsight had shooed her out, telling her that he needed to put a fresh poultice on Mothwing's wound. Now she turned toward the medicine-den entrance as Mothwing padded out, blinking in the morning sunshine.

Duskfur's gaze flicked toward Mothwing's shoulder, which was plastered with wet herbs. "How are you?"

“Better.” Mothwing’s eyes looked clear, but she moved stiffly and sat down as though walking out of the den had been hard work.

“You must be hungry.” Duskfur hurried away.

Nightheart watched her grab the stiff mouse from the empty fresh-kill pile. “I’m glad I didn’t eat it,” he mewed to Sunbeam as Duskfur carried it back to Mothwing. As the RiverClan medicine cat bent down awkwardly to take a bite, he guessed it would be a while before her wound fully healed.

Sunbeam’s belly growled.

Nightheart looked at her guiltily. He hadn’t asked if she was hungry. “Should I go and hunt?” he offered.

“We’d better stay in camp until Tigerstar gets back,” Sunbeam told him. “Besides, the border patrol will be here soon. They’ll bring prey.” Her ears pricked.

Bushes rustled outside, and Nightheart looked hopefully toward the entrance. “It sounds like they’re back now.”

Streamkit shot past him. Firkit, Bloomkit, and Whisperkit raced behind. Firkit lunged, trying to snag Streamkit’s tail. He missed and, with a yelp, tumbled like a pinecone over the ground.

“Firkit!” Cinnamontail hurried from the nursery, her tail fluffed with alarm. “Are you hurt?”

Firkit scrambled to his paws and whisked his tail. “I’m okay.” As he turned to chase his littermates again, the bushes outside rustled more loudly and the camp wall shivered.

An unexpected scent touched Nightheart’s nose. His pelt rose along his spine. Paws were thrumming the earth, and they were moving fast. *Something’s wrong!*

Sunbeam stiffened beside him. “That’s not a ShadowClan patrol,” she hissed.

Nightheart jerked his gaze toward Cinnamontail. “Get the kits into the nursery!”

Cinnamontail stared back in surprise. “Why?”

“Quickly!”

Her expression froze as she heard the panic in his mew. Then, faster than a hawk, she raced for her kits.

Sunbeam had already reached them. She nudged up Firkit along to the nursery.

Cloverfoot darted from her den, her gray fur spiked with alarm. “What’s happening?”

“I think we’re being attacked.” Nightheart faced the entrance. He unsheathed his claws as RiverClan scent swept over him and warriors streamed into the camp. His heart lurched as he saw the broad-shouldered tom leading them. *“Splashtail?”* Hadn’t he fled?

For a moment, Nightheart wondered if the false RiverClan leader was running away from the bristling warriors at his tail. But the look on his face wasn’t that of a tom running for his life.

Around Nightheart, ShadowClan warriors leaped to their paws. Splashtail pulled up, a threat in his eyes. His patrol stopped behind him.

Nightheart’s thoughts whirled. Why was he *here*? Where was Tigerstar?

The camp had frozen, tension sparking through the air as the ShadowClan and RiverClan warriors glared at one another. Nightheart saw with a jolt of horror that Hollowspring and Sparrowtail were with them. Hollowspring was Sunbeam’s littermate; Sparrowtail was her father. They’d left ShadowClan out of loyalty to Berryheart, but they had never been as openly critical of Tigerstar as she had. How had Berryheart managed to convince them to fight with her for a fox-heart like Splashtail?

Splashtail’s eyes were wide in mock surprise. “Isn’t your leader here?”

Cloverfoot stared back at him. “He went to help RiverClan—” She broke off, her gaze glittering with alarm as she seemed to realize what was happening.

Nightheart felt suddenly cold. Had this been Splashtail’s plan all along?

“Poor Tigerstar.” The vicious tom’s mew dripped with disdain. “He just can’t help rushing to RiverClan’s rescue.” His gaze swept the camp. “But now it’s time for RiverClan to rescue *you*.”

“We don’t need rescuing,” Cloverfoot spat.

“Are you sure?” Splashtail’s gaze mocked her. “Berryheart’s been telling me that Tigerstar’s leadership leaves a *lot* to be desired.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Cloverfoot snarled. “Berryheart’s confused. She got into her head that Clans—”

“As far as I can tell,” Splashtail interrupted, “Berryheart is the only cat in ShadowClan who understands what good leadership is.” He paused and looked over his shoulder.

Cloverfoot gasped as Berryheart padded into camp. A stone seemed to drop in Nightheart’s chest. The black-and-white she-cat wasn’t limping anymore.

She lied to us! Nightheart’s breath caught in his throat.

Splashtail went on. “She agrees that it’s time RiverClan stepped in to help you.”

Blazefire began to growl. Pouncestep bared her teeth.

“It’s for your own good,” Splashtail told them. “You’ll see, in time. Once I’m the leader of both RiverClan and ShadowClan, everyone will be happier.”

“Happier?” Cloverfoot stared at the false RiverClan leader in disgust. “You’ve got bees in your brain!” She lunged at Splashtail with a hiss, and the camp seemed to explode as ShadowClan charged forward to meet RiverClan’s attack.

The air seemed to rip open, split by shrieks from the fighting cats. Minnowtail barreled into Tawnypelt, Hollowspring dived at Snowbird, and Sparrowtail and Scorchfur fell twisting and screeching to the ground, their claws digging into each other’s pelts. Berryheart lunged at Blazefire. She dragged him to the ground and began pummeling his belly with vicious hind paws.

Not Blazefire! It had been moons since Sunbeam had believed he might be her mate, but it still made her ache to see him hurt. Blood roared in Nightheart’s ears. Where was Sunbeam? He glanced toward the nursery.

She was crouched at the entrance, thrusting Bloomkit inside. Cinnamontail’s other kits were already out of sight. Grassheart stood at the entrance, her back arched and teeth bared, daring any cat to approach. How would Sunbeam react when she saw her family fighting for Splashtail? Nightheart watched helplessly as she turned toward the battle. He saw her gaze flit from Hollowspring to Sparrowtail and then fix on her mother. It glazed with confusion. Berryheart seemed to be tearing Blazefire apart.

“Berryheart! No!” Sunbeam raced toward her. “He’s your Clanmate!” As she neared, Minnowtail twisted away from Tawnypelt

and lunged at her.

Sunbeam staggered and began to fall, and energy surged beneath Nightheart's pelt. He shot forward, shouldering his way among the fighting cats, and reached Sunbeam in three breaths. But Sunbeam had already recovered her balance; she hooked her claws into Minnowtail's shoulder and shoved her back toward Tawnypelt. Then Sunbeam turned toward Blazefire and her mother.

Nightheart darted in front of her and blocked her path. "Sunbeam!" She mustn't get between them. If she hurt Berryheart, she'd never forgive herself. Blazefire could take care of himself. He'd already wriggled free of Berryheart's grip and was batting her back toward the camp wall.

"She lied to us!" Sunbeam stared at him. "She was never really hurt!"

"I know." Nightheart could see Lizardtail and Nightsky advancing on Grassheart. Their hackles were high, and they'd unsheathed their claws as they neared the snarling ShadowClan warrior. Nightheart dragged his attention back to Sunbeam.

Her gaze glittered with grief. "She just wanted to get Tigerstar out of camp so Splashtail could attack," she groaned.

Nightheart wanted to comfort her, but there was no time. Lizardtail and Nightsky were closing in on Grassheart. "We have to help."

Sunbeam held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. "Okay."

"Nightheart!" Duskfur's mew sounded from the medicine den. The RiverClan she-cat crouched beside Mothwing. Their ears were flattened, their pelts spiked as the battle raged in front of them.

Sunbeam had seen them too. "Splashtail wants them dead."

Nightheart nodded. "We need to get them out of here."

"I can take them to the gully," Sunbeam mewed. "The one we slept in last night. It's a good hiding place and, if worse comes to worst, easy to defend."

Nightheart pondered her suggestion. The thick ferns would shield the two RiverClan cats, and the steep walls and tight space would give Duskfur the advantage if she had to fend off an attack. "Okay, but I'll come with you."

"You're needed here!"

Outside the nursery, Grassheart grabbed Lizardtail with her foreclaws, but Nightsky was dragging her hind legs from beneath her. Nightheart's tail bushed in alarm. If the ShadowClan she-cat fell, they'd be on her like rats.

He switched his gaze back to Sunbeam. "Will you be okay on your own?"

But Sunbeam had already turned toward the medicine den. "Duskfur will be with me."

Nightheart glanced toward the entrance. Wrestling warriors crowded the camp. He'd have to clear a path for Sunbeam before he helped Grassheart. He plunged into the battling cats, hauling Mallownose off Tawnypelt and flinging him to one side. Tawnypelt glanced gratefully at Nightheart, then turned back to Mallownose and thumped her paws down on his spine as he tried to find his balance. With a yowl, she heaved him toward the edge of the clearing.

Nightheart turned and almost crashed into Hollowspring, who was rearing up at Snowbird, his claws outstretched. He ducked beneath the black tom's belly and pushed up, shoving Hollowspring hard. Hollowspring staggered away, flailing as he fought to stay upright, but Snowbird didn't give him a chance. Snarling, she leaped on top of the RiverClan tom, and the two warriors rolled away in a cloud of flying fur.

Nightheart glanced back toward the medicine den. Sunbeam was leading Duskfur and Mothwing along the path he'd cleared. Only Sparrowtail and Blazefire were blocking the way now. He fell in beside Blazefire and began to drive Sparrowtail back toward the warriors' den. Blazefire acknowledged him with a glance, then aimed a swipe at the RiverClan tom's ear. Nightheart slashed Sparrowtail's other ear, then slashed it again. He felt Duskfur and Mothwing brush past his tail as they ducked after Sunbeam through the entrance tunnel.

Grassheart's angry screech rang across the camp. "Get away, you fox-hearts!"

Nightheart glanced at Blazefire. "Can you handle this alone?"

"I'll do my best." Blazefire launched himself at Sparrowtail and dragged him to the ground.

Nightheart charged for the nursery. Grassheart was batting desperately at Lizardtail and Nightsky, but the two RiverClan warriors took turns snapping at her with bared teeth like a pair of badgers. Panic began to glitter in Grassheart's eyes.

"I'm coming!" Nightheart leaped over Blazefire and barged his way through the battling cats.

The smell of RiverClan had drowned out ShadowClan's scent. *ShadowClan is outnumbered!* Splashtail had brought more than a battle patrol; he'd brought nearly the whole of RiverClan. *Where is the border patrol? We need them here!*

He pushed past Yarrowleaf, who was facing Mallownose and Shimmerpelt alone. Mistpaw, Frostpaw's sister, had joined Berryheart as she cornered Scorchfur against the camp wall.

Grassheart was on the ground, kicking viciously at Nightsky as the RiverClan she-cat tried to pin her down. Lizardtail had hold of her hind leg and was trying to drag her away from the entrance. Inside, Cinnamontail watched from the shadows. Nightheart could hear the kits behind her.

"I want to fight!"

"I'll shred them!"

Their high-pitched mews were fierce, but Cinnamontail blocked their way. She stared at Nightheart with wide, frightened eyes.

"I won't let any cat in," he promised her.

Lizardtail pricked his ears as Nightheart spoke. Letting go of Grassheart's leg, he whirled around to face him and snarled.

Nightheart stared at him. "Why are you doing this?" He had the vague sense that Lizardtail had been close to Harelight.

Lizardtail glared back at him. "I have no choice!" He leaped at Nightheart. The force of his attack sent Nightheart skidding backward. He dug his hind claws into the ground and braced himself as Lizardtail came at him again with a flurry of swipes. A swinging blow caught his cheek, and he ducked away before a second one could rip his ear. Diving beneath Lizardtail, he wrapped his forepaws around the RiverClan tom's hind legs. He kept his claws sheathed. This was Frostpaw's Clanmate. He tugged, trying to unbalance Lizardtail, but Lizardtail twisted and sank his teeth into Nightheart's hind leg. The light brown tom bit down hard. Pain shot up

Nightheart's spine and seemed to explode at the back of his head. With a screech, he whipped around and, hooking his claws into Lizardtail's shoulders, dragged him onto his side. He yanked his hind leg free and held the RiverClan warrior down. Pressing his muzzle close, he hissed, "You're a warrior, not a rogue! How can you follow a cat like Splashtail?"

Lizardtail seemed to freeze. Fear glittered in his eyes. *It's not me he's scared of.* Nightheart frowned. It was as though Lizardtail's terror was surging up from inside, from something deep in his heart.

Lizardtail began to writhe in Nightheart's grip. "We have no choice," he spat. "Splashstar already killed my son, Harelight. Now Gorseclaw is the only kin I have left! I have to protect him! Splashstar is holding the kits and Havenpelt hostage. If we don't fight, he'll kill them one by one. He says he'll start with the kits."

Havenpelt was the only queen in RiverClan. Wasn't she Splashtail's mother too? *That means—*

Shock hit Nightheart like a wall of icy water. "But the kits are his *kin*!"

He realized he was trembling. Lizardtail was trembling too.

Lizardtail lowered his voice to a husky growl. "If he's prepared to kill his own kin, what else is he prepared to do?" The RiverClan tom's gaze flitted toward the RiverClan leader, who was holding Cloverfoot down, his face twisted with rage. "I *have* to fight you!" With a sudden yowl, Lizardtail pushed up with all four paws and shoved Nightheart away.

Surprised, Nightheart stumbled backward. Lizardtail came at him, paw swinging, claws outstretched. "I'm sorry," he breathed. The blow missed Nightheart by a whisker.

Heart pounding, Nightheart fought back. But he wasn't going to hurt the tom any more than he had to. With a grunt he raked his claws down Lizardtail's flank, just hard enough to leave a shallow wound that would convince Splashtail that Lizardtail had fought in the heart of the battle.

Lizardtail caught his eye, then dived away into the fighting cats.

Nightheart turned toward Grassheart. Nightsky had backed away, and the ShadowClan warrior stood at the nursery entrance once more, her back arched and tail spiked angrily. Nightsky seemed

frozen. Had she come to her senses and realized she was attacking a *nursery*? Nightheart looked at her, pity welling in his chest. Her eyes glistened with uncertainty, and she turned away and disappeared into the battle.

Grassheart was panting, blood showing on her pelt.

“Are you okay?” Nightheart asked.

“Yes,” she puffed. “No cat’s getting past me today.”

Nightheart felt a rush of admiration for the ShadowClan she-cat. He had never become a full ShadowClan warrior, but right now these cats felt like his own Clan. They were being attacked in their own camp by a merciless warrior who was no more than a rogue.

He turned and saw the clearing, spattered by blood, a writhing mass of claws and pelts. Cloverfoot was bloody, her fur standing out in tufts as she pushed back at Splashtail. Yarrowleaf and Scorchfur were tail to tail, rearing up at four RiverClan warriors who were battering them with blow after blow. Blazefire backed away as Sparrowtail and Mallownose advanced on him. Rage burned in his eyes. ShadowClan was fighting fiercely, as though it was the last battle they’d ever face.

Nightheart dropped into an attack crouch and fixed his gaze on Hollowspring, who was raking his claws across Snowbird’s face. Nightheart bunched the muscles in his hind legs and prepared to leap. He was going to defend ShadowClan as ferociously as he’d ever defended ThunderClan.

The entrance shivered, and he saw Sunbeam’s brown-and-white pelt as she raced into camp. His heart quickened. She’d brought backup: the border patrol was with her. Hope surged in his chest. ShadowClan was overwhelmed, but suddenly it looked as though they might actually win this fight.

Chapter 5

Running, Sunbeam heard the shriek of battle in the distance. She pushed harder, her breath quickening. She'd left Mothwing and Duskfur in the gully, crouching beneath the ferns, and made them promise to stay until someone came for them. She swallowed back dread. What if ShadowClan lost the battle? She'd have to find her way back to them somehow. She couldn't leave them there for Splashtail's cats to find.

Ahead she saw the ditches. They cut between the trees as though giant claws had clawed out the earth. Slatefur, Flaxfoot, and Snaketooth were racing toward them. *The border patrol!* They were running for camp, too, pelts spiked, ears flat against their heads.

She fell in beside them, matching their pace as they leaped ditch after ditch.

"What's happened?" Snaketooth asked her without breaking her stride.

"RiverClan attacked!" Her paws burned from running. "It's all been a lie! Splashtail is still the leader of RiverClan." Alluding to her mother's treachery pierced Sunbeam's heart with fresh horror. *I thought she had come to her senses.* For a moment emotion welled hot behind her eyes, and she ran harder as though she could escape it.

She pulled into the lead as they neared the camp and swerved around the thick dogwood that hid the entrance. With Snaketooth, Slatefur, and Flaxfoot at her heels, Sunbeam charged through the bramble tunnel and burst into the clearing.

The smell of blood hit her first; then she saw the fighting cats. With torn pelts, thrashing tails, and slitted eyes, they looked like part of a nightmare from the Dark Forest. Slatefur, Flaxfoot, and Snaketooth threw themselves into the battle. It swallowed them like water closing over their heads. ShadowClan seemed overwhelmed. Was the *whole* of RiverClan here?

Her mother was beside Splashtail, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the false RiverClan leader, driving Flowerstem and Cloverfoot back toward the warriors' den. Hopwhisker was lying injured on the

ground. Splashtail kicked her as he passed, his hind claws slicing a fresh wound across the tortoiseshell's ribs. Groaning, Hopwhisker curled up like a beetle.

Sunbeam flinched. *How can Berryheart fight beside him?* For a while she'd believed that her mother had turned on Splashtail and was a true warrior once more. It had been like waking from a nightmare. But the nightmare was true.

She looked for Nightheart. *Was he hurt while I was gone?* He was outside the medicine den, wrestling Mallownose. There was blood on his pelt, but he didn't look badly injured. She felt a wash of relief.

Shadowsight was watching from the shadows inside the den. He caught Sunbeam's eye desperately, as though she had the power to stop this battle. *If only I could.* Sunbeam raced for Nightheart. She dodged as fast as a weasel between the fighting cats—past Snowbird as Lizardtail sank his teeth into her neck, behind Grassheart as she blocked blow after vicious blow, in front of Yarrowleaf and Scorchfur balancing on their hind legs as, tail to tail, they fought off four RiverClan warriors.

Nightheart was still grappling with Mallownose, trying to pin the RiverClan warrior to the ground. As Sunbeam reached them, Mallownose twisted from his grip and reared up, ready to slam his paws down on Nightheart's chest, but Sunbeam thumped into his side and sent him staggering away.

"Thanks." Nightheart leaped to his paws as she fell in beside him. "Are Mothwing and Duskfur safe?" He glanced at her as Mallownose came back at them.

"Yes." She aimed a swipe at Mallownose's cheek and caught it, ripping his fur. He snarled and swiped back with a blow that hit her like a rock and knocked her sideways. As she recovered her balance, she could feel blood welling above her eye where Mallownose's claws had caught her. Nightheart lunged at the RiverClan tom with a hiss as Sunbeam paused to wipe away the blood. Wincing at the pain, she heard Oakfur yowl from the elders' den.

"You're no better than a pack of dogs." The old ShadowClan tom was flailing and snarling as Breezeheart dragged him outside. Rage

surged beneath her pelt. How dare she treat an elder like that!

Behind her, Nightheart growled at Mallownose; he crouched low, ready to lunge at the RiverClan tom.

“I have to help Oakfur,” she called to him.

“Go.” Nightheart didn’t move his gaze from the light brown tabby tom. “*I* can deal with this fish-licker.”

Sunbeam raced for the elders’ den. Breezeheart had grabbed Oakfur by his scruff and was jerking him backward, exposing his belly. The brown-and-white she-cat curled her lip in a look of vicious triumph. “What was that you called me? A *webfoot*?” She slashed at the old ShadowClan tom’s belly.

Sunbeam dived at her, slamming into her so hard that the RiverClan she-cat fell sprawling onto her belly. She pinned Breezeheart’s shoulders to the ground. “You don’t deserve to be called a warrior.” She lifted a paw to shred the she-cat’s ears and felt claws pierce her flanks like thorns. Mallownose was hauling her backward. *He must have gotten away from Nightheart!*

The brown RiverClan tom wrapped his paws around Sunbeam and rolled with her onto the ground. Sunbeam tried to writhe free, but Mallownose was gripping her hard. She glimpsed him drawing back his hind legs and braced herself for pain.

“Get off her!” Nightheart’s yowl blasted over them. She felt Mallownose’s grip loosen as Nightheart dragged the tom away.

Scrambling to her paws, Sunbeam lunged at Breezeheart. As she knocked the RiverClan she-cat back with a hefty swipe, Oakfur pushed past and slashed at Breezeheart with fierce, angry blows. Breezeheart’s gaze flitted from Sunbeam to Oakfur. She hesitated for a moment, then turned and plunged into the throng of fighting cats. Mallownose had fought free of Nightheart’s grip. The tom glanced at him, then at Sunbeam and Oakfur, then dived after Breezeheart into the mob.

Blood roared in Sunbeam’s ears. ShadowClan was fighting for their lives. Grassheart was batting Podlight away from the nursery entrance. “You’re no medicine cat,” she snarled at the gray-and-white tom. “You never were!” The ShadowClan warrior didn’t see Minnowtail running at her, and her eyes flashed with shock as the RiverClan she-cat raked clumps of fur from her flank. But she didn’t

give ground. She kept pushing Podlight back, blocking him with blows each time he tried to barge past.

Cloverfoot was in the clearing, struggling to fight her way through a line of RiverClan warriors, trying to get back to Blazefire, who faced Splashtail and Berryheart alone. They were lashing out at the white-and-ginger tom, pushing him back with a flurry of blows so vicious that he was pressed hard against the sharp brambles of the camp wall.

“You have to get help!” Sunbeam faced Nightheart. Oakfur was trembling beside them. “Go to ThunderClan.”

“That’ll take too long.” Nightheart looked around the camp in dismay.

“Someone needs to get Mothwing and Duskfur away from ShadowClan territory.” Sunbeam stared at him. “If ShadowClan loses this battle, Splashtail will find them and—” She broke off, the words too awful to say.

“Come *with* me,” Nightheart begged.

“I can’t.” She looked helplessly back at him. “I have to stay here and fight.”

“Then I’ll stay, too.” Nightheart lashed his tail.

“No.” Sunbeam dug her claws into the earth. “You need to tell the other Clans what’s happened.”

“But—”

She cut him off. “My mother caused this,” she mewed. “I can’t leave.”

“I need you—”

“Go!” she hissed. “Now!”

Oakfur nudged Nightheart sharply. “You have to tell Squirrelstar what Splashtail has done here. We need her to send a patrol!”

“Please hurry!” Sunbeam glanced across the clearing. The ShadowClan warriors were beginning to back away from the invaders. Yarrowleaf and Scorchfur had dropped to their bellies. Cloverfoot was slumped on the ground. Flowerstem and Hopwhisker were huddled together beside the warriors’ den, while Slatefur and Snaketooth, blood matting their fur, shrank away from Nightsky and Graypaw. “It might be your only chance to escape!”

Tawnypelt was still fighting. She'd rushed to help Blazefire, but she was struggling to push Splashtail away from the battered tom. Berryheart had jumped onto the mossy log that lay at the edge of camp and was watching the battle stumble to a halt, her eyes glowing with satisfaction.

Fury surged in Sunbeam's belly. "You *have* to go!" she snapped at Nightheart. "ShadowClan needs help." She pushed him toward the entrance and felt a spark of hope as he disappeared into the forest.

Her claws itched as she turned toward her mother. She wanted to pull her mother down from that log and make her see that this wasn't a victory; it was betrayal. She began to cross the clearing, then paused as she noticed Cinnamontail slinking away from the nursey, her kits bunched around her. *They're making for the dirtplace tunnel!* Behind them, Grassheart fought on, lashing out at Mallownose and Podlight. Her swipes were weak now, but they were enough to distract the two RiverClan warriors. They hadn't noticed Cinnamontail.

Sunbeam's heart quickened. *Hurry!* Cinnamontail and her kits were close to the tunnel entrance. Sunbeam willed them to escape. *Keep going.* She held her breath. *Don't look back.*

"Stop them!" Sunbeam froze as Splashtail's yowl rang across the camp. The false RiverClan leader swung his gaze toward Cinnamontail and the kits. "No cat leaves this camp without my permission!"

Mallownose and Podlight stiffened and turned and, pushing Grassheart out of the way, charged after the brown tabby queen and the kits. Cinnamontail tried to run, bundling the kits ahead of her, but Podlight dragged her back and Mallownose blocked the tunnel.

Blazefire lay slumped at Splashtail's paws. Tawnypelt crouched over him, her eyes glittering with alarm. "You'll be okay," she mewed. "I'll fetch Shadowsight—"

Splashtail hooked his claws into the tortoiseshell's pelt and hauled her away. His eyes sparkled with menace as he glowered down at Blazefire. He lifted a paw to strike a finishing blow, but Tawnypelt darted forward and blocked it. It hit her with a thump, and she wailed as he tore out fur.

“Fox-heart!” Sunbeam raced across the clearing and barged at him with her head like a badger, sending him backward.

Splashtail stumbled but kept his balance. Sunbeam forced herself not to tremble as he glared at her. “Isn’t this your kit?” he snarled to Berryheart, without moving his gaze.

“One of them.” Berryheart sniffed. “Don’t waste your energy on her.”

Sunbeam blinked. *Is she trying to protect me?* She felt a flash of hope, but her mother went on. “All she cares about is her precious Nightheart. If you really want to hurt her, hurt him.” Sunbeam stared in disbelief, but Berryheart didn’t seem to even see her anymore. Her attention was on Splashtail. “We’ve got a new Clan to run.”

Splashtail seemed to agree. Pushing Sunbeam out of the way, he padded toward his warriors, his eyes shining with triumph. “Didn’t I tell you we’d win?”

The RiverClan warriors blinked dully back at him. They looked exhausted and almost as battered as ShadowClan.

“You have to get out of here!”

Tawnypelt’s urgent whisper took Sunbeam by surprise. The tortoiseshell stared at her with glittering green eyes. Blazefire lay shivering at her paws, blood streaking his fur.

“I want to stay and help,” Sunbeam whispered back.

“You’ll be more help out there,” Tawnypelt urged. “Tell the other Clans.”

“Nightheart’s already telling them.”

“I don’t want you to be a hostage,” Tawnypelt hissed. “It’ll make it harder for Squirrelstar to order an attack if one of her warriors is here.”

“She’d still—”

“You don’t belong here.” Tawnypelt leaned forward, her breath warm on Sunbeam’s muzzle. “You’re not a ShadowClan cat anymore. Fetch ThunderClan. Save us.”

Sunbeam blinked back at her. How could she abandon these cats? She’d grown up with them. She couldn’t leave them alone with her mother and a monster like Splashtail. Besides, it was too late to escape. The battle was almost over. There was no way she’d get out. “Splashtail won’t let me leave.”

“You can use the tunnel.” Tawnypelt glanced at the camp wall beside them. Beneath the brambles, a dip in the ground made a gap. It was hidden by branches, but Sunbeam remembered it. She’d snuck out that way when she was an apprentice, going hunting with Blazefire and Lightleap while the rest of the Clan was sleeping. Tawnypelt nudged her toward it. “You’ll be able to help us out there.”

She was right. If Sunbeam stayed, she’d be powerless. She glanced across the clearing. Splashtail and Berryheart were watching their warriors round up any ShadowClan cats who could still walk and push them into their dens. She’d be more help if she could get to ThunderClan. “I’ll be back,” she told Tawnypelt.

“I know.” Tawnypelt began to pull the brambles clear and Sunbeam ducked down and wriggled into the gap beneath.

Thorns scraped her spine as she pushed through. She’d grown since she was an apprentice, and so had the brambles, but she clawed her way deeper and pulled her tail in after her. She heard Tawnypelt scrape the branches back into place behind her and paused, pricking her ears. “Did anyone notice?” she whispered.

“No,” Tawnypelt breathed back.

I should go. But Sunbeam couldn’t bring herself to climb out the other side. She was safe here, hidden deep inside the camp wall. *One last look before I go.* Twisting around, she peered back through the branches.

Shadowsight was hurrying anxiously among his fallen Clanmates, assessing their wounds. Then he headed for his den.

Splashtail blocked his way. “Where are you going?”

“I need herbs,” Shadowsight told him.

“*I* control ShadowClan herbs now,” Splashtail snapped.

“You don’t even know how to use them.” Shadowsight glared at the false RiverClan leader.

“Does it matter?” Splashtail stared back at him. “Everything in this Clan belongs to me.”

“I have to treat my Clanmates,” Shadowsight insisted. “They’re wounded and they need help.” He tried to push past Splashtail, but Splashtail shoved him back.

“Do you really want a camp full of sick warriors with infected wounds?” Shadowsight growled. “Wouldn’t it be better to lead a Clan

full of healthy cats?”

Splashtail seemed to consider this for a moment, then called to Berryheart, who was peering into the warriors’ den at Cloverfoot’s empty nest. Was she wondering if she should make her nest there? “Fetch herbs for the medicine cat!” Splashtail yowled.

She looked at him. “Ask one of your warriors to run your errands.”

Splashtail unsheathed his claws. “You *are* one of my warriors.”

Berryheart glared at him but headed for the medicine den, her tail flicking irritably.

“I’ll need plenty of marigold,” Shadowsight snapped as she passed.

Sunbeam’s heart sank as Berryheart disappeared inside the den. *Who are you?* She no longer recognized the cat who’d raised her. The Berryheart she’d known would tell nursery stories and give the best parts of her prey to her kits. She’d let them chase her tail and shelter them beneath her belly if they were caught outside in the rain. This couldn’t be the same cat. Had she been possessed by a cat from the Dark Forest, like Bramblestar? But Berryheart’s transformation from a loyal warrior into a traitor hadn’t been quick. It had begun almost reasonably. She’d argued like many cats against warriors switching Clans. She’d come from a generation where switching Clans had been forbidden. It made sense that she didn’t want the Clans to change. But she’d gone too far. She’d used her beliefs as an excuse to hurt any cat she disagreed with. And now she’d turned on her own Clan. Blazefire was still crouched in the clearing, the blood from wounds Berryheart had inflicted dripping onto the ground. And Berryheart seemed proud of what she’d done.

Sunbeam’s throat tightened as her mother ducked back out into the clearing and dropped a meager bundle at Shadowsight’s paws. *I should leave.* Nightheart would be waiting for her. She could help him plan how to save ShadowClan from Splashtail. But Sunbeam didn’t move. She watched Berryheart cross the clearing and scowl at Cloverfoot.

She must know *this is wrong.* Sunbeam’s heart ached with hope. Berryheart had been raised as a warrior, as a true ShadowClan cat. She couldn’t really have forgotten what it was to be loyal and brave

and honorable. *If I stay*—Sunbeam's pulse quickened—*I might still be able to save her.*

Chapter 6

On the moonlit shore of the island, Frostpaw fluffed out her fur against the cold. Her heart beat steadily but hard in her chest, the way it had done the whole day; every muscle in her body was tense as she wondered what was happening in the ShadowClan camp.

Lightleap and Gullswoop had gone inland to see if there was prey in the undergrowth around the clearing. Whorlpelt was gazing into the water nearby, almost as though wondering if it could take his weight. Stonewing hung back among the trees, his eyes round with worry. Was he, too, imagining what might be happening in the ShadowClan camp?

Tigerstar paced a few tail-lengths away at the edge of the island, his gaze barely leaving the distant pine forest, no more than shadow against the star-specked sky. “If I get my paws on Splashtail, I’ll shred him.”

Tigerstar had been growling threats since they’d been trapped here. Twice he’d leaped onto the tree-bridge and bared his teeth at Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt. Both times Tigerstar had leaped down from the bridge without attacking them, bristling even more.

The RiverClan guards were amused by his fury.

“Poor ShadowClan can’t swim,” Gorseclaw had mocked.

“Useless bunch of frog-eaters,” Brackenpelt had snorted.

Gorseclaw’s eyes had gleamed with delight. “It’s a shame they don’t have any frogs to hunt here.”

“It’s a shame they decided to come here at all,” Brackenpelt taunted.

“Poor ShadowClan,” Gorseclaw jeered.

“Look on the bright side.” Brackenpelt’s gaze had glittered as it swept disdainfully over Tigerstar. “By the end of today, ShadowClan will have Splashtail as leader instead of this bossy old fleabag.”

Now, as he paced on the shore, Tigerstar muttered to himself. “I hope StarClan is watching this. I hope they’ve already made a place in the Dark Forest for that slimy, fish-hearted rogue.”

“I just hope Puddleshine is safe,” Frostpaw murmured. Had RiverClan taken him prisoner? “They wouldn’t have hurt him, would

they?”

“There’s no knowing what a fox-heart like Splashtail will do,” Stonewing growled darkly.

“But Puddleshine’s a medicine cat.” Even as she said it, Frostpaw knew that was no longer a guarantee of safety, not with Splashtail beside the lake.

Tigerstar glanced again at Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt. “We should attack.”

“It would be too easy to knock us into the water,” Stonewing warned.

It was true. The bridge was too narrow for them to rush the RiverClan warriors together. They’d have to take turns, like acorns lining up to be batted away. Too risky for cats who couldn’t swim.

“I can’t just stand here and do *nothing*!” Tigerstar’s pelt lifted along his spine. “Who knows what Splashtail is doing to ShadowClan?” His eyes sparked with frustration. “There are kits in the camp!”

“Even Splashtail won’t hurt kits,” Stonewing mewed.

Frostpaw wished she could be so certain. Splashtail had killed Harelight in cold blood. He’d ordered the murder of his Clanmates. He was capable of anything.

She had already offered to swim beneath the tree-bridge, staying underwater until she was clear of Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt. She could climb out down the shore, under the shadow of darkness, and find out what was happening in the ShadowClan camp. But Tigerstar had forbidden her from setting paw on either the RiverClan shore or ShadowClan’s. Splashtail would be patrolling them by now, and if she was caught, she might suffer the same fate as Harelight. He wouldn’t let her risk it.

“We *have* to find a way back!” As Tigerstar clawed angrily at the ground, Lightleap and Gullswoop padded out from the trees.

Gullswoop was carrying a mouse. She dropped it with a sigh. “It was all we could find.”

“But where there’s one, there’ll be more,” Lightleap mewed hopefully.

“I’m not hungry,” Whorlpelt muttered.

“Nor me,” Stonewing chimed.

“Do you want it?” Lightleap blinked at Frostpaw.

“No, thanks.” Frostpaw gazed toward the ThunderClan shore on the far side of the lake. An idea was tugging at her. “I don’t want to risk swimming on a full belly.” It would be dangerous, but she couldn’t ignore it. “I might get a cramp.”

Tigerstar glanced at her, then followed her gaze. “You’re not thinking of swimming over there.” His ears flicked uneasily.

The lake stretched wide and deep to ThunderClan territory. Frostpaw shifted her paws nervously. She’d never swum such a distance, but she was the only one who could try.

“It’s too far.” Stonewing padded out into the moonlight and gazed across the water. “Even for a RiverClan cat.”

“But Squirrelstar can help us,” Frostpaw pressed.

“The WindClan shore is closer,” Lightleap pointed out.

Frostpaw had already considered it. The WindClan shore was still a good distance away, but it was nearer than ThunderClan. “I’m not sure Harestar will help,” she mewed. “He was even more determined than Squirrelstar to only move against Splashtail if RiverClan turned on him.”

Tigerstar’s tail was flicking. “He’ll have to act once he hears that Splashtail’s attacked the ShadowClan camp.”

“*And* that he killed his deputy.” Stonewing’s gaze had shifted to the distant moor, rising like a badger’s spine against the crow-black sky.

“You saved WindClan’s kits, didn’t you?” Lightleap reminded Frostpaw. Just days before, when a storm had hurled a tree into the WindClan camp, crushing the nursery, Frostpaw’s warning had kept Featherpelt’s kits from being crushed along with it. She’d even crawled into the wreckage afterward to pull Leafkit out. “He owes you.”

“He might still refuse.” Whorlpelt looked wary. “A fight with Splashtail could turn into a war, and he wants more than anything to protect his own Clan.”

“I have to try, though, right?” Frostpaw blinked nervously at Tigerstar.

The ShadowClan leader’s eyes were narrowed. He was considering it. “Do you think you can swim that far?”

“I’ve been swimming since I was a kit.” Frostpaw tried to sound more confident than she felt. *I’ve swum in rivers, with the riverbed only a few tail-lengths below me and the riverbank no more than a few breaths away.* She kept her doubts to herself. “I can do it.”

“The moon is bright.” Lightleap looked toward the two dark figures on the tree-bridge. “We’ll need to distract Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt so they don’t notice her in the water.”

“That’s easy.” Tigerstar lifted his tail. “They won’t resist a chance to taunt us.” He looked steadily at Frostpaw. “You don’t have to do this if you think it’s too dangerous.”

“I’ll be okay,” she promised him. ShadowClan was in trouble now. *Two* Clans needed help. She started to head around the shore to the far side of the island.

Lightleap walked with her. “Wait until Tigerstar’s gotten their attention,” she warned as Frostpaw began to wade into the water.

Frostpaw glanced back, her heart thumping. The lake felt icy as it swirled around her paws.

“Hey, Gorseclaw!” Tigerstar’s yowl rang out in the cold night air. “Do you really think you’re safe there?”

Whorlpelt joined in. “There’s only two of you!”

“Two’s enough to deal with a bunch of cats who are scared to get their paws wet,” Gorseclaw yowled back.

“You should be watching your tails instead of staring at us,” Tigerstar called. “Do you really think I’d come here without a backup plan?”

“Where are your Clanmates?” Whorlpelt taunted.

“Did they leave you alone here because you’re expendable?” Gullswoop chimed.

Brackenpelt’s snarl shot back at them. “They left us here because they know we can fight a bunch of mangy ShadowClan warriors with our tails tied.”

Lightleap blinked at Frostpaw. “It sounds like Tigerstar has their attention.”

Frostpaw swallowed back fear and took a step further into the lake.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you?” Lightleap called.

“Swimming is easy once you know how,” Frostpaw promised her. She turned away in case Lightleap could see panic in her eyes and waded deeper into the water. She shivered as it washed her belly fur, bracing herself as it rose around her flanks until it was deep enough to push into and swim.

As the lake closed over her spine, the chill of it snatched her breath. *I’ll warm up soon,* she thought. Swimming harder to keep the cold at bay, she pulled into deeper water and glanced back. RiverClan’s marshland was hidden behind the island, but across the moonlit water she could see the hillside with the Twoleg greenleaf camp. The pelt dens were lit up eerily from the inside, and the pine forest loomed beside them like a great storm sweeping in. Ahead, the shore seemed a lifetime away. Beyond it, WindClan’s moor rose against the sky. She pushed back a sense of foreboding. *I can do this.* She gritted her teeth. She had to.

Behind her, the yowls of Tigerstar and the RiverClan warriors were growing distant, but in such bright moonlight it would be easy to pick out her round head bobbing in the lake. Now that she’d lost the cover of the island, it would be safer to swim underwater. She paused, treading water for a moment. The tightness in her chest eased as she adjusted to the cold. She took a breath, then another, then dived beneath the surface.

The water shimmered with moonlight, but when she looked down, Frostpaw saw only blackness. Did the lake have a bottom this far out, or did it reach down forever? The thought made her heart thump. Water pressed hard against her flanks. Her lungs ached. *Keep going.* She pulled with her forepaws, her hind legs kicking slowly up and down until she was moving through the water like a ripple. She needed to be as far from the island as possible before she surfaced for air. The ache in her lungs became a burn, and she fought the urge to surface and drink in great gulps of air. *Remember, you’re a true RiverClan cat.* She pulled harder, trying to ignore the panic welling in her chest, swimming as strongly as she could until she felt blackness at the edge of her vision. She needed air.

Pushing up, she reached for the surface, her panic hardening as she realized it was farther away than she thought. The current must have pulled her downward. Fighting the urge to draw in great drafts

of water, she swam dizzily upward, no longer sure if the darkness came from the lake or if she was losing consciousness. *I'm going to be okay!*

Suddenly the water began to sparkle around her. *Am I dying?* Terror shrilled beneath her pelt. Had StarClan come to fetch her? She fought upward, paws flailing, and broke through the shimmering, moonlit surface, sucking in desperate gulps of air. Could Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt see her? She didn't dare look back at the island. Instead she ducked once more beneath the surface and kept swimming.

She was careful to stay in the moonlit water and grew used to the yawning depth below. Finding her rhythm, she managed longer stretches, only surfacing when she knew she couldn't swim another nose-length without air. As tiredness began to slow her down, she turned, water streaming around her eyes, and felt a flicker of satisfaction as she saw that the island was no more than a small cluster of trees in the distance. Gorseclaw and Brackenfur wouldn't be able to see her from here. She could keep her head above the surface now. But where was the moor? Her throat tightened. ThunderClan's oak forest rose ahead of her. She turned, confused for a moment as she realized WindClan territory was little off to one side. She'd swum off course. She'd have to backtrack.

Dread gathered like a shadow in her belly. Her muscles felt as heavy as stone, and her effort couldn't keep the chill of the lake from reaching through her pelt. Her paws felt numb from the cold, but she pushed on. *I have to save RiverClan.* She kept the thought in her mind, repeating it over and over as she focused on the distant shore, a pale strip of moonlit pebbles marking the line between the water and the dark heather beyond.

Slowly, slowly, it grew closer. She kept going, pushing through her exhaustion, past her fear. Hope began to grow, warming her body, sending fresh energy to her paws. She could smell the moor—the pungent aroma of peat and heather marked by WindClan scent. The shore was no more than a few tree-lengths away. She was going to make it. Her heart began to beat harder, joy rising in her chest.

Suddenly, something slipped past her paws. She felt scales brush her pads and looked down, startled as the large, dark shape of a fish slid beneath her. It swam up to one side, then the other, circling as though curious to find her here. Panic sparked in Frostpaw's belly. Was it a pike? She'd heard of kits who'd been swallowed whole and warriors who'd had lumps ripped from their flanks by the vicious teeth of pikes that lurked in the deepest stretches of the river. Did they live in the lake too?

The fish circled her again, then sank into the darkness. Was it gone? Swallowing back terror, Frostpaw swam faster, her breath coming in gasps as she raced for the shore. The fish bumped her paws again. Her heart seemed to explode as it rose once more in the water beside her. Its scales glittered in the moonlight. It was longer than she was, its thick body as wide as her chest, and moved with such ease that there was no way she could outswim it. *Go away!* She fixed her gaze on the shore. Land was just a tree-length away now. She only had to swim a little farther and it would rise to meet her. She felt the fish brush her flank. Swimming frantically, she braced, ready for it to sink its teeth into her. *StarClan help me!*

Her paws brushed against pebbles. She'd reached the shallows! Glancing sideways, she saw the fish turn and head back into the darkness. Weak with relief, Frostpaw stumbled out of the water and collapsed on the shore.

She lay still for a while, catching her breath, wishing she could lie here until her fear and exhaustion had ebbed away. But Tigerstar and the others were relying on her. She pushed herself to her paws and began to trek inland.

Her pelt was still dripping and her claws were clogged with mud as she reached the hillside and began to follow a path through the heather. Opening her mouth, she tasted the air. She wanted to find fresh WindClan scent. She needed to locate a patrol. She climbed up the slope, trying to work out if this was the right way to the WindClan camp. As long as she was climbing, she'd be heading in the right direction. She tried not to think of the last time she'd crossed the moor alone in search of WindClan. She tried not to remember the figure who had darted out of the night and slashed her throat, leaving her for dead.

“Frostpaw?”

She froze as she heard a mew. The wind whisked WindClan scent over her, and she jerked her muzzle around to find Woodsong and Sedgewhisker staring at her from the path behind.

She blinked at them anxiously. Woodsong had been one of the cats who’d refused to let her into WindClan’s camp when the storm was raging. Would she be equally hostile now? “I need to speak with Harestar.”

Sedgewhisker narrowed her eyes warily. “Why?”

“Splashtail has trapped Tigerstar on the island. We think he’s attacked the ShadowClan camp.”

Sedgewhisker padded closer. “You only *think* he’s attacked ShadowClan?”

“The warriors who were guarding us said that Splashtail would be leader of ShadowClan by the end of today,” Frostpaw told her.

Sedgewhisker’s eyes glittered with suspicion. “What was a RiverClan cat doing with Tigerstar?”

“Enough questions.” Woodsong slid past them, looking at Frostpaw with understanding. “This sounds serious. Let’s take her to Harestar. She can explain everything to him.” Frostpaw’s pelt flattened in relief as the brown she-cat began to head along the trail.

Sedgewhisker watched her go, stiffening for a moment, then seemed to agree. “Come on, then.”

But Frostpaw was already hurrying after Woodsong.

Sedgewhisker fell in beside her. “Why *were* you with Tigerstar?” Her suspicion sounded more like curiosity now.

“We were going to help RiverClan.”

“While they were attacking *ShadowClan*?” The light brown tabby she-cat looked puzzled.

Frostpaw was struggling to keep up with Woodsong. Her paws ached from the swim. It was all she could do to focus on the path. “I’ll explain everything to Harestar,” she promised.

Woodsong glanced back at her “You’re soaked,” she mewed. “Did you *swim* from the island?”

“Yes.”

Sedgewhisker blinked. “All the way?”

“I couldn’t exactly stop halfway, could I?”

Sedgewhisker looked astonished. “I knew RiverClan could swim, but the lake is *huge*.”

“I know.” Frostpaw was relieved to see the high gorse wall of the WindClan camp looming ahead. She didn’t have the energy to explain anything more to these warriors. She only wanted to speak with Harestar.

Woodsong broke into a run and ducked through the entrance tunnel.

Sedgewhisker paused outside. “You must be frozen.” Her eyes rounded sympathetically. “I’ll see if Kestrelflight will give you a nest in the medicine den.” She looked suddenly worried. “You won’t try to swim back tonight, will you?”

The thought made Frostpaw shudder. She hadn’t even considered where she’d go once she’d spoken to Harestar. Would the WindClan leader let her stay here? She longed suddenly for a soft nest and a deep sleep and blinked gratefully at Sedgewhisker. “I don’t mind where I sleep,” she mewed. “So long as it’s warm.”

“Frostpaw?” Woodsong was calling through the entrance. “Harestar’s waiting for you.”

Frostpaw hurried through the tunnel, her heart quickening once more. What would Harestar say when he heard the news? Would he agree to move against Splashtail at last?

The WindClan leader was waiting in the shadows beside the gorse wall. The camp looked deserted. WindClan must be asleep. He started forward as he saw Frostpaw, his eyes gleaming in the darkness. “Woodsong says Splashtail has attacked ShadowClan.” His mew was urgent.

“He sent Berryheart and Brackenpelt to their camp,” Frostpaw told him quickly. “They said RiverClan had driven Splashtail out and needed help. Tigerstar sent a patrol. I was with it. We were tricked into tracking Splashtail to the island. It was a lie. It was *all* a lie.” Frostpaw suddenly felt helpless, overwhelmed by exhaustion and shock. How could Splashtail always be one paw step ahead? “Splashtail murdered Harelight,” she blurted. “He ordered his warriors to kill Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing on sight. He’s crazy. And now he’s trapped Tigerstar and four of his warriors on the island and he’s attacking ShadowClan.”

Harestar stared at her solemnly. “Did you see him attacking ShadowClan?”

“Of course we didn’t!” Frustration surged in her chest. “We were trapped on the *island*!” *Weren’t you listening?* Was Harestar going to ignore this just as he’d ignored every other fox-hearted thing Splashtail had done? “But we saw Berryheart, Minnowtail, Lizardtail, and Nightsky heading for ShadowClan after they ambushed us, and Brackenpelt said that Splashtail would be ShadowClan’s leader by the end of the day!” She searched Harestar’s gaze. Why was he still hesitating? She’d saved WindClan’s kits. She’d risked her life to swim here. How much more did she have to do to earn his help? Didn’t he care about anything except WindClan? Was he even a *warrior*?

He dipped his head. “I will speak to my Clan.”

She blinked at him. *Is that all?* Was he still playing for time?

But he went on. “At dawn I’ll take a patrol to speak with Squirrelstar and Leafstar.”

Please do more than speak!

“Then we’ll go to the ShadowClan camp and see for ourselves what’s happening.”

Frostpaw felt hope spark in her belly. “What about Tigerstar?” She knew how small and desperate her mew sounded.

“I’ll send a patrol to get him and his warriors off the island.”

Frostpaw wanted to collapse on the smooth grass. Finally, Harestar was helping. At last she felt she wasn’t carrying the whole sky on her shoulders. The long swim in the darkness, the cold of the water and tension of not having known what Harestar would say, seemed to overwhelm her.

Harestar blinked at her kindly. “You look exhausted.” His gaze flicked toward Sedgewhisker, hanging back a few tail-lengths away. “Find Frostpaw a nest. Make sure it’s warm and dry and ask Kestrelflight to have a look at her.”

“I’ll be okay,” Frostpaw promised.

“I’m sure you will,” Harestar mewed. “But it’s better to be safe than sorry. And we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Chapter 7

I should have stayed with her. Regret tugged like a thorn in Nightheart's belly. He longed to run back to the ShadowClan camp, to Sunbeam.

"Pull her up!" Duskfur was below him, at the bottom of the gully, heaving Mothwing from behind with her paws.

Nightheart grabbed the medicine cat's scruff. Night had fallen. The forest was swathed in darkness. The battle might be over by now. He dragged Mothwing up and over the edge, being careful not to bump her wound. *What if Sunbeam is hurt?* The tug in his belly hardened.

"Thanks, Nightheart." Mothwing found her paws, wincing with pain.

Duskfur hopped out beside her. "Did you say they were still fighting when you left?"

"Yes." Nightheart glanced back, between the shadowy trees, toward the ShadowClan camp. Dread began to press at the edge of his thoughts. "It looked pretty bad."

"It must have been hard," Mothwing mewed. "Leaving without Sunbeam."

"She insisted." Nightheart looked at his paws. It sounded like an excuse. He should never have left her.

"I'm glad you did." Duskfur scanned the forest. "I couldn't have dragged Mothwing out of the gully by myself, and we couldn't have stayed where we were. She needs to be in a medicine den."

Her words didn't ease Nightheart's guilt.

Mothwing gazed at him. "It will be okay."

"Sunbeam is strong," Duskfur chimed.

"I hope that's enough." Nightheart shivered. "I wish she didn't feel so responsible for her mother."

"How could she not?" Mothwing mewed. "She's a good warrior. She's loyal."

Duskfur whisked her tail. "Let's go," she mewed. "If the battle is ending, there may be patrols heading this way soon." She looked at Nightheart. "I'm hoping you know which way to go."

“The SkyClan border’s over there.” Nightheart nodded toward a steep rise. He was relieved that the RiverClan cats needed him. It made him feel he had made the right decision leaving Sunbeam.

A bright moon shone between the branches overhead as he led the RiverClan cats through the sharply shadowed trees, up the rocky slope, toward a stretch of forest where the pines gave way to oak and beech. As they crossed the border, Mothwing limped badly. The scent of the herbs plastering her wound rose, pungent, in the chilly night air. Nightheart was acutely aware they were on another Clan’s territory. “Can you walk any faster?” He glanced guiltily at Mothwing, knowing she was in pain. “I don’t want to bump into a SkyClan patrol.”

“It might be a good thing if we do,” Duskfur mewed. “It will save us a trip to warn Leafstar that Splashtail has invaded ShadowClan.”

“He might have his eye on SkyClan territory next,” Mothwing added grimly.

“Really?” Nightheart mewed anxiously.

“Splashtail loves power,” Duskfur growled.

A cold shiver ran down Nightheart’s spine. Surely Splashtail wasn’t strong enough to take over *another* Clan! He led Mothwing and Duskfur down a steep cut in the forest floor, into a wide dip that would take them down to the lake. Beechnuts were strewn among the fallen leaves. The empty husks were sharp. “Watch your paws.” He glanced back and saw the RiverClan cats gingerly picking their way between them. They were used to the soft marsh and the grassy banks of the river. “Do you need me to slow down?”

Before they could answer, a muffled growl sounded from the ridge above the dip: “Be quiet!”

Nightheart froze. Mothwing and Duskfur stopped behind him, their ears pricking hopefully.

“Is that a SkyClan patrol?” Duskfur whispered.

Nightheart tasted the air. RiverClan scent was drifting between the trees. Had Splashtail sent a patrol to search already? “Get back.” He began to nudge Mothwing and Duskfur toward a dogwood clinging to the slope behind them.

A second growl sounded from the ridge. “Stop wriggling!”

Then a kit squealed.

Mothwing's pelt ruffled. "What's a kit doing out in the forest?"

Nightheart strained to see through the dark. "I'll go and see what's happening. You hide here."

"I said to keep moving!" The first mew sounded again. To Nightheart, it sounded like a kit being hurried along.

"I'm coming with you," Duskfur started forward.

Nightheart tugged her back with a paw. "I need you to protect Mothwing," he told her. "Whatever happens, you must get her to ThunderClan."

Mothwing looked worried. "Shouldn't we stick together?"

"Something's wrong. That kit sounds scared," Nightheart's pulse was racing. Had it crept out of the SkyClan camp? That didn't explain the RiverClan scent.

"If I'm not back by moonhigh," he told Duskfur and Mothwing, "follow this dip to the lake, then—"

Mothwing interrupted. "Once we reach the lake, I'll know where to go." She gazed anxiously up at the ridge, where the kit's mewl was growing more desperate.

"Stay out of sight." Nightheart scrambled up the side of the dip. At the top, a patch of nettles blocked his view. He dropped into a stalking crouch and crept through them, slitting his eyes as the sharp leaves stung his nose and his ear tips. As he neared the far side, he saw two figures padding between the trees. The dappled moonlight gleamed on their thick, glossy pelts. They were definitely RiverClan.

"Be quiet or I'll give you something to wail about!"

Nightheart recognized Fognose's impatient growl. She pushed an older fluffy white kit ahead of her. Beside her, a tom with a long tail and broad shoulders was nudging along a second kit. *Sneezecloud.*

What were they doing on SkyClan territory? Nightheart could taste the fear-scent of the kits. *Those are SkyClan kits!*

"I'm not sure we should be stealing kits," Sneezecloud hissed between his teeth.

"They'll be fine once they're in our nursery," Fognose growled. "And they'll save us from having to fight SkyClan."

Sneezecloud grunted. He sounded unconvinced.

Nightheart flexed his claws. What kind of fox-heart snatched *kits*? He had to free them. But how could he do it without risking the kits

getting hurt or lost in the forest? He forced himself to stay still. He had to think. Should he head for the SkyClan camp and raise the alarm? *No.* Sneezecloud and Fognose would be gone by the time he got back here with a patrol.

“I want Blossomheart!” The white tom-kit Fognose was pushing suddenly stopped and turned, tail whipping angrily.

“Be quiet!” Fognose growled.

When Sneezecloud turned away from the auburn she-kit he was guarding, the kit tried to dash toward the ferns, but Sneezecloud thumped his paw down on her tail and pinned her to the ground. “It seems to me that stealing kits is more likely to start a war than prevent one.”

Fognose jerked toward him, the tom-kit now trapped beneath her sizable paw. “Stop thinking and just do what Splashstar ordered.”

Nightheart moved into an attack crouch. He took a breath, sank lower, then launched himself toward the RiverClan warriors. He exploded from the nettles with a shriek and landed a tail-length from the kidnappers. Sneezecloud scrambled backward. Fognose spun around, her eyes widening with alarm. She let go of the white tom-kit. The auburn she-kit was already free.

“Run!” Nightheart yowled at them as he barreled into Fognose and sent her tumbling backward. “Follow the lake to ThunderClan! The border patrol will help you.” He turned and slashed Sneezecloud across the muzzle, but Fognose was already scrambling to her paws as the kits dived into the nettle patch.

“Keep running!” Nightheart yowled after them. He lunged at Fognose as she raced for the kits, grabbing her shoulders and curling his claws deep into her pelt. She shrieked and twisted, turning on him, her eyes sparkling with rage.

Flinging herself at him, she knocked him backward. He threw his paws around her chest and fell with her to the ground, holding on tight as she writhed in his grip.

Sneezecloud darted past them, heading for the nettles. Nightheart reached for him with his free paw and hooked his claws into the warrior’s hind leg. With a jerk, he tugged it from beneath him.

The gray-and-white tom fell to the ground with a thump. But Fognose had wriggled free. Nightheart made a fast grab at her tail

and hung on to both warriors, one paw clutching each, his claws like barbs in their fur. He felt a rush of panic as Fognose ripped free. She raced for the nettles. She'd easily hunt the kits down before they reached camp.

"Take me instead!" he yowled after her. "I'd make a better hostage, wouldn't I?"

Fognose pulled up.

He'd got her attention. "You're a warrior!" he pressed. "Only a fox-heart steals kits."

She turned to face him, and Sneezecloud stopped struggling in his grip. Fognose padded slowly back toward them.

"He's got a point." Sneezecloud looked at her.

She stopped a nose-length away. Nightheart could smell her fishy breath. "You'll come quietly?" she asked.

"If it means you'll leave the kits alone," Nightheart told her.

"Splashstar might be pleased to have a ThunderClan cat prisoner," Fognose mewed thoughtfully. "Especially one who's Squirrelstar's kin." She glanced at Sneezecloud. "If he's not, I'm blaming you."

"Okay," Sneezecloud mewed. "Just so long as we don't have to steal kits."

Nightheart got to his paws. "Let's go," he growled, trying not to think what would happen if he reached the RiverClan camp. There would be plenty of chances to escape on the way. For now, the SkyClan kits were safe.

"I'm going to tell Splashstar it was *you* who lost him," Fognose snapped.

"Splashstar doesn't even know we *had* him," Sneezecloud pointed out.

"He'll know," Fognose growled ominously. "Nothing gets past *him*."

"Don't worry," Sneezecloud grunted. "He can't get far. He's a drypaw."

Nightheart tried to hold his breath, but he'd been running; he needed air. He fought to stop himself from panting and crouched lower among the reeds, until the water touched his chin. Heart

thumping, he stared at the thick wall of stems. *Please, StarClan. Don't let them find me.*

He could still feel the RiverClan warriors' claw marks from his last escape attempt. He'd made a run for it as they'd marched him out of the forest, but the river had blocked his way, and they'd easily outflanked him as he'd swerved and tried to flee along the riverbank. This time he'd been smarter. He'd waited until there was somewhere he could hide.

They mustn't find him. Nightheart forced back a shudder. He'd seen how Splashtail had dealt with his own deputy. He didn't want to imagine what the cruel tom would do to a warrior from an enemy Clan.

"You can't escape."

Nightheart stiffened as Fognose's mew sounded beyond the reeds.

"We know the reed beds better than we know our own pelts," Sneezecloud chimed in.

They sounded close, no more than a few tail-lengths along the shore. *Can they smell me?* Nightheart backed away. He glanced at the far shore. Could he escape across the river? Surely swimming wasn't *that* hard. RiverClan kits learned; why shouldn't *he*?

He waded farther out, his heart lurching as he felt the riverbed fall away. The current snatched him and he fought to stay afloat. Panic sparked in every muscle, but he ignored it. If he could just stay afloat, he could let the river carry him downstream, away from his kidnappers.

He flailed his paws, trying to steer himself. His heart quickened as he felt the water holding him up. *I can do this!* Nightheart began to move his paws in rhythm. *I just have to get clear. If I can—*

The reeds suddenly burst open. Dismay swamped him as Fognose crashed through and plunged into the water beside him. He floundered, trying to swim away, but panic made him clumsy and he sank beneath the surface. Pain sliced his shoulders as he felt Fognose's claws hook into his fur. He shrieked as she hauled him up, water flooding into his mouth and down his throat. Spluttering, he felt himself being dragged backward through the reeds. Water streamed into his eyes as he found air. He lashed out, coughing,

writhing desperately, fear pulsing in his blood as he tried to get free, but Fognose's claws were deep in his pelt.

"Grab him!" she yowled at Sneezecloud, and Nightheart could do nothing but thrash helplessly at the air as the two warriors hauled him onto the riverbank.

"Did you really think we wouldn't find you?" Fognose's eyes glittered with anger as Nightheart struggled to get to his paws. She lashed out at him; fire seemed to lick around his muzzle as her claws sliced his nose. Still coughing, Nightheart threw a weak blow back at her, but Sneezecloud lunged at him. The RiverClan warrior hit him hard, and Nightheart staggered, shock pulsing through his body, and thumped onto his side. Winded, blinded by water, gulping for air, Nightheart sank against the earth, defeated. These warriors were stronger than he'd anticipated. There was no way he could escape. But he wasn't giving up. He was going to save his strength. Once he reached the RiverClan camp, he'd find another way out.

The moon was high as Fognose shoved him though the reed entrance tunnel and he stumbled into the clearing. His body ached. His pelt stung with wounds from the battle and the fresher ones Fognose and Sneezecloud had given him. In the moonlight he could see RiverClan warriors around the clearing. He could smell their blood. They were wounded from the battle too. Mallownose sat beside the camp wall, gingerly licking at a wounded paw. Blood had crusted around his nose. Minnowtail, Shimmerpelt, and Mistpaw were sharing a fish that smelled like it been caught the day before. Hollowspring and Sparrowtail crouched together, hollow-eyed, a few tail-lengths away.

"Where's Splashstar?" Fognose stopped in the middle of the clearing and glared at Mallownose.

Mallownose blinked back at her. "He's still in the ShadowClan camp with the rest of the patrol, cleaning up."

Fognose narrowed her eyes. "Is that why you're all sitting around doing nothing when you should be training for the next battle?"

"We're still recovering from the last one," Shimmerpelt grunted.

Fognose flattened her ears. "Shall I report that to Splashstar?"

Shimmerpelt and Mistpaw exchanged looks; then Mistpaw got to her paws, clearly stiff from the wounds showing through her fur. Mallownose got to his paws too.

Fognose glared at Hollowspring and Sparrowtail. “You too,” she snapped. “We already had to *persuade* you to join the battle. Are we going to have to persuade you to train as well?”

The two former ShadowClan cats stood up wearily and padded after Mallownose to the end of the clearing, where they began to lunge clumsily at each other. They looked tired enough to drop, but they kept going, lunge after lunge, as Fognose eyed them.

Why do they go along with it? Nightheart felt bewildered. Then he remembered Lizardtail’s words: *If we don’t fight, he says he’ll kill them one by one.* Surely they didn’t really believe Splashtail would *kill* the queen and her kits. It must be an empty threat. If they really wanted to, Splashtail’s warriors could stop him from hurting anyone. Couldn’t they?

Breezeheart lingered in the clearing. Her gaze flitted over Nightheart. “Why’s he here?” she asked Fognose.

“We decided a ThunderClan warrior would make a better hostage than a couple of scrawny kits,” Fognose told her.

Breezeheart narrowed her eyes. “Scrawny kits are easier to guard.”

Fognose looked ruffled for a moment, then puffed out her chest. “Why don’t we let Splashstar decide?”

Nightheart saw a flicker of anxiety flash across her gaze.

Breezeheart crouched beside the fish and took a bite. “Put him with the others.”

The others? Nightheart felt a flicker of surprise. Did RiverClan already have prisoners? Fognose shoved him toward the nursery. Brambles had been wrapped over it. More choked the entrance, and as Fognose pushed him inside, Nightheart had to close his eyes and flatten his ears to protect himself from the sharp thorns. He tumbled into the den, the warmth of it suffocating after the cold night air. It smelled of stale bedding. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw Mosspelt, RiverClan’s only elder, crouching beside Havenpelt. The RiverClan queen’s tail was wrapped around Floatkit,

Rapidkit, and Troutkit, who were sleeping against her belly. She blinked at Nightheart with round, distrustful eyes.

“Why are you here?” Mosspelt’s mew was wary.

Nightheart dipped his head. “I’m a prisoner,” he mewed. “From the sound of it, so are you.” His nose twitched. There was a smell here worse than the stale bedding. He turned his head and saw a half-eaten fish. It smelled rancid. “Is that what they give you to eat?”

“The others don’t eat any better,” Havenpelt mewed. “Splashstar has them battle training all the time. There’s not much time for hunting.”

“I’d catch something decent for Havenpelt so she could nurse the kits,” Mosspelt growled, “if they’d just let me out of this stinking den.” She looked at the brambles crowding the entrance. “Even if I managed to squeeze through there without losing my pelt, they post a guard outside most days.”

“There’s no guard now,” Nightheart told her.

Mosspelt glanced around. “A lot of them are still in ShadowClan camp.” She stared into space. “But even if I did get out, Splashstar would be angry. He’s ordered us to stay inside.”

Nightheart’s belly tightened. An elder scared of her own Clanmates? The thought repelled him. He looked at Havenpelt. “Can’t you reason with him?” he mewed. “He’s your kit, after all.”

“I hardly recognize him now,” she growled. “I certainly didn’t raise him to be cruel. Do you know what he named Mistpaw and Graypaw when he gave them their warrior names?”

Nightheart shook his head.

“Graysludge and Mistslime.” Havenpelt’s eyes flashed with anger. “He said they were a traitor’s kits.”

“Was he talking about Curlfeather?”

“Yes, he was.” Havenpelt shifted her paws. “He said that her kits needed names that would remind their Clanmates that treachery is never forgiven.”

Mosspelt’s gaze flitted along Nightheart’s bloody flank. “Were you taken prisoner in the battle?”

“Afterward,” Nightheart told her.

“Were you running away?” Mosspelt asked.

Nightheart's pelt grew hot. Leaving Sunbeam had felt like running away. "I was helping Mothwing and Duskfur escape."

"They're okay?" Havenpelt's eyes brightened.

"I think so," Nightheart mewed. "With any luck, they're in the ThunderClan camp by now."

"How did the battle go?" Mosspelt asked.

"I think ShadowClan lost." Nightheart watched the two RiverClan cats. Were they pleased?

Havenpelt looked away. "Good."

"Good?" Nightheart's heart sank. Did these cats support Splashtail too, despite his threats? He glanced around the foul-smelling den. "Don't you realize it'll make him stronger?"

Havenpelt didn't answer.

"He said that if they didn't win," Mosspelt explained, "the kits would suffer."

Havenpelt wrapped her tail tighter around the three small sleeping bodies at her belly.

"Do you really think he would hurt them?" Nightheart had been hoping that Lizardtail had exaggerated. He couldn't imagine any warrior turning on kits, especially when they were his own kin. The fear in Havenpelt's eyes told him that she believed it without question. Mosspelt looked scared too.

"Surely your Clanmates would stop him if he tried to hurt a kit," he pressed.

"What would happen if they failed?" Havenpelt shuddered.

Mosspelt's tail began to flick angrily. "Splashstar has enough supporters in the Clan to make it dangerous to stand up to him," she growled.

"Who?"

"Breezeheart, Brackenpelt, and Podlight for certain," Mosspelt told him. "They believe him when he says he will lead all the Clans."

"And that's what they *want*?" Nightheart could hardly believe his ears. "Isn't being a warrior about loyalty and honor? Not power?"

Havenpelt was trembling. "Splashstar has convinced them that if we don't control the other Clans, the other Clans will control us. He told them that Tigerstar's occupation was only the start. It was just an excuse to make RiverClan part of ShadowClan. He said that the

other Clans let him do it because they want to be rid of RiverClan too. New borders will give them extra land."

"And they believe him?" Nightheart had thought Splashtail was the only crazy cat in RiverClan. Now he realized there were enough crazy cats here to make RiverClan truly dangerous. No wonder Lizardtail had been scared enough to fight. Nightheart tried to ignore the dread growing in his belly. "You said some of your Clanmates support Splashtail," he mewed. "That must mean there are some who don't. You must have Clanmates willing to stand against him." He looked from Havenpelt to Mosspelt. "Do you know who you can trust?"

They eyed each other nervously.

"I think so," Mosspelt mewed.

"Good." Nightheart moved closer. "Tell me their names. If we know who will turn on Splashtail, we know who to target. With their support, we'll have an advantage. And it sounds to me like we need all the advantage we can get."

Chapter 8

Sunbeam woke with a start, curling her claws deeper into the bark as she remembered she was balancing on a branch, high in a pine tree. Her heart lurched as splinters sprinkled down and pattered onto the ShadowClan camp's wall. Nervously, she peered down between the branches and scanned the camp below. No one had looked up. And even if they did, she told herself, the thick needles would shield her from sight. Besides, it was still dark enough for her fur to melt into shadow.

How long had she slept? Dawn light was showing between the trees, but the sun had not yet lifted above the horizon. She'd climbed up here last night as the defeated ShadowClan warriors were herded into their dens. She'd been relieved when Splashtail had sent Sparrowtail and Hollowspring back to the RiverClan camp along with Mallownose and Shimmerpelt. She didn't want to watch them crowing over ShadowClan like the other RiverClan warriors. Had they looked relieved as they were leaving, even guilty as they glanced back at the blood-spattered clearing? Perhaps she'd just hoped they did.

As the night wore on, Sunbeam kept wondering what had happened to Nightheart. Had he made it home with Duskfur and Mothwing? Surely Squirrelstar had heard by now what had happened here. Sunbeam kept hoping the ThunderClan leader would storm into camp with a patrol at her heels. But, if she did, what would become of Berryheart? The thought frightened Sunbeam. *I need time to make her see how wrong she's been. She needs a chance to make up for what she's done.* If only her mother had looked a little repentant as she'd lounged beside Splashtail after the battle. Instead she'd shared a plump pigeon with him, eyeing the empty clearing with a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes, while her former Clanmates huddled in their nests.

The evening had dragged by, but eventually the camp had fallen into an uneasy silence. Sunbeam had lost track of time and finally, exhausted and stinging from battle, she'd fallen asleep. Now, in the early-morning light, she could hear Owlnose and Lizardtail ordering

the ShadowClan cats from their dens. One by one, her former Clanmates limped into the clearing, where Podlight and Minnowtail shoved them toward the camp wall. Splashtail watched from the mossy log as they gathered, ragged and beaten, beside the brambles. Berryheart sat in the shadows beside the warriors' den.

"Stop dragging your paws!" Owlnose hurried Spireclaw and Fringewhisker toward their Clanmates with a flick of his tail.

The two ShadowClan warriors glanced at him angrily but joined their Clanmates, Shadowsight moving between them, keeping low, quietly checking their wounds. Cinnamontail pushed her kits behind her, glaring at the RiverClan cats.

"Is everyone here?" Splashtail called sharply to Lizardtail.

"No one's escaped."

As Lizardtail answered, Nightsky and Graypaw raced into camp. Splashtail looked at them. "Any sign of Sunbeam or Nightheart?"

Sunbeam shifted her paws nervously. Her scent trail, sharpened by fear, must have been obvious.

"None," Nightsky reported.

Really? Sunbeam narrowed her eyes. Maybe the RiverClan cats couldn't pick out scents yet through the pungent smell of the pines. Or perhaps Nightsky *wanted* her and Nightheart to escape. She peered closer at Nightsky.

"They must have gone back to ThunderClan." Berryheart padded from the shadows.

Splashtail grunted. "I guess we scared them away."

"They'll tell Squirrelstar," Owlnose warned.

"Good." Splashtail's eyes gleamed. "The sooner we deal with ThunderClan, the better." He fixed his gaze on Minnowtail. "I want the kits and the queen kept in the nursery. They're not to leave it under any circumstances. You and Graysludge can guard them."

Graysludge? Sunbeam's eyes widened. Was that what Splashtail had named him?

"If anyone escapes," Splashtail snarled, "you two will be responsible."

Minnowtail nodded and padded toward Cinnamontail, her pelt twitching nervously as the ShadowClan queen glared at her. Then

Cinnamontail let her hackles fall and followed quietly as Minnowtail and Graysludge escorted her and the kits to their den.

“The rest of you can eat.” Splashtail looked from the ShadowClan warriors to the fresh-kill pile, a meager assortment of frogs and mice that the RiverClan warriors must have caught in the night.

“I’m not eating prey caught by another Clan.” Cloverfoot padded from among the ShadowClan warriors and glared at the false RiverClan leader.

Splashtail blinked at her coolly. “We’re all one Clan now,” he told her. “Or hadn’t you realized?” He lifted his muzzle. “This is the first dawn of your new lives as RiverClan warriors.”

Cloverfoot’s pelt spiked. “Never!”

“We’d rather die than follow a fox-heart like you!” Snowbird unsheathed her claws.

“We’ll never be part of RiverClan!” Snaketooth hissed.

Owlnose took a step forward, his tail flicking ominously. Cloverfoot stared back at him. Behind her, ShadowClan warriors began to stiffen, narrowing their eyes, their ears flattening as though preparing to fight. Podlight, Lizardtail, and Nightsky lined up beside Owlnose. Graysludge and Minnowtail fell in behind them, their fur lifting along their spines.

Sunbeam’s heart quickened. Was there going to be another battle? There were fewer RiverClan warriors now. Perhaps ShadowClan would win. She leaned forward on the branch, ready to scramble down and help.

“Wait!” Splashtail shouldered his way between Nightsky and Minnowtail and stopped a nose-length away from Cloverfoot. “Didn’t I tell you already what would happen if you tried to fight us?” He glanced toward the nursery. “It’s not just you and your warriors who will pay.” His gaze narrowed. “Every scratch you inflict on my warriors will be carved into your kits.”

Sunbeam’s mouth grew dry. Splashtail really *was* crazy. And even more dangerous than she’d imagined. Her heart sank as Cloverfoot dropped her gaze, signaling her Clanmates back with a flick of her tail.

Did Berryheart care that Splashtail was prepared to hurt kits? Sunbeam felt suddenly cold. Her mother was calmly choosing prey

from the fresh-kill pile, her pelt as smooth as a greenleaf river. Was she okay with this?

Splashtail hopped off the log and glanced at his warriors. “I need to speak to you before I leave.” The RiverClan cats hurried over to huddle around him and listen while he spoke, his mew too low for Sunbeam to hear.

Berryheart didn’t join them. Instead she began taking prey to her former Clanmates. Was she hoping it might soften their anger toward her? She dropped a frog at Yarrowleaf’s paws and stopped, leaning forward as though whispering in Yarrowleaf’s ear.

Yarrowleaf drew back, surprised, but Berryheart kept talking.

Sunbeam strained, wishing she could hear. Splashtail’s back was to her mother. Was Berryheart up to something while Splashtail was distracted? Hope sparked in her chest. Was her mother planning to help her Clanmates after all? Quickly, Sunbeam crept back along the branch and lowered herself down the trunk, clinging on like a squirrel, her belly scraping the rough bark. She landed lightly and crossed quickly to the camp wall, tracking it until she’d reached the patch where the ShadowClan warriors were huddled beyond the thick brambles. Her heart pounding, she pressed her ear to the prickly branches.

She could hear her mother’s mew, just loud enough to reach her.

“You have to believe me,” Berryheart whispered. “It’s all going smoothly. This is part of my plan.”

Sunbeam stiffened. Did Berryheart think she was using Splashtail? Was that possible?

Berryheart went on. “Now that I’ve gotten Tigerstar out of the way for you, we can run our Clan the way it should be run. I’ll be leader and we can finally make sure that there’s no Clan-swapping, no blurring of borders. ShadowClan can be the way a Clan is meant to be.”

“What are you talking about?”

Sunbeam heard Snaketooth’s soft mew.

“Berryheart says this is part of her plan,” Yarrowleaf told him in a whisper.

“*Her* plan?” Snaketooth snorted. “This is Splashtail’s plan.”

“He just thinks it is.” Berryheart sounded excited. “I’m using him. He got rid of Tigerstar for us, and now ShadowClan can go back to the way it was.”

“What do you mean?” Snaketooth’s mew was alarmed. “‘Got rid of Tigerstar’? Is he dead?”

“Splashtail’s holding him prisoner on the island,” Berryheart breathed.

“Is he okay?” Snaketooth sounded worried.

“Sure,” Berryheart mewed. “He’s just a prisoner. I wouldn’t hurt a Clanmate.”

“You could have fooled me,” Snaketooth grunted.

“I had to pretend,” Berryheart explained. “To convince Splashtail that I’m on his side.” She paused. “Of course, Tigerstar will have to be dealt with *eventually*, but Splashtail can do that.”

“Leaving your paws clean, I suppose.” Snaketooth sounded unimpressed.

“So what now?” Yarrowleaf asked.

“Just follow my lead,” Berryheart told her. “Once Tigerstar’s gone, we can get rid of Splashtail, and ShadowClan will be ours.”

“*Yours*, you mean,” Snaketooth growled.

“Ours,” Berryheart insisted. “I’ll be leader, of course, but I’ll be running the Clan how you want it to be run. How it *should* have been run, before all this friendship between Clans and Clan-swapping started.”

Sunbeam couldn’t help feeling a little relieved. Berryheart was still loyal to her Clanmates, even though she’d chosen a strange way to show it. But was “making ShadowClan the way it used to be” worth all this? Was it even possible to undo all the changes that had happened in the past few moons?

“Tell Flaxfoot and Snowbird,” Berryheart hissed to Yarrowleaf and Stonewing. “Spread the word that I’m on your side. I’ll go and tell the others.”

Her mother’s paw steps padded quickly away, and Sunbeam realized she was trembling. Whatever the flaws in Berryheart’s plan, rallying her former Clanmates with a promise of a new ShadowClan might be a way to drive Splashtail out.

“Berryheart!” Splashtail’s yowl rang across the clearing. There was threat in it. Sunbeam’s belly tightened. Had her mother been overheard? Keeping low, Sunbeam scurried along the camp wall to the narrow gap she’d squeezed through yesterday. She wriggled beneath the brambles. Thorns scraped her back and loose dirt got into her mouth. She spat it out, squirming forward until she could see between the branches.

Berryheart stood in front of her former Clanmates as Splashtail glared at her. His tail swished menacingly. Sunbeam held her breath as Owlnose, Nightsky, and Lizardtail fanned out around him. Eyes gleaming, they padded toward Berryheart.

“I was just telling them to keep quiet and do as you say.” There was guilt in Berryheart’s mew as she faced them.

“You didn’t think I entirely trusted you, did you?” Splashtail narrowed his eyes. “Did you think I’d allow a move you make or a word you say to go unnoticed?”

Owlnose’s eyes sparked with contempt. “‘We can get rid of Splashtail’”—he mimicked Berryheart’s mew—“‘and ShadowClan will be ours.’”

“I didn’t—”

Owlnose cut her off. “I heard everything, *traitor*. You’re just like the rest of them. Using RiverClan to get what you want.”

“I was just testing them,” Berryheart mewed quickly.

“Really?” Splashtail snarled. “Do you want to prove it?” He nodded to Owlnose.

Owlnose darted forward and grabbed Yarrowleaf by her scruff. The ginger she-cat twisted, struggling as he dragged her away from her Clanmates and shoved her at Berryheart.

“Kill her,” Splashtail told Berryheart with a hiss.

Sunbeam’s breath caught in her throat. Surely her mother wouldn’t harm her own kin. Berryheart had attacked her Clanmates yesterday, but this was different. This was cold-blooded. Yarrowleaf was a prisoner. Even Berryheart wouldn’t obey such an order. Would she?

Yarrowleaf bristled as Owlnose let go. “No one kills me that easily!” She arched her back at Berryheart. “They might die trying.”

“Even better.” Splashtail’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Whichever one of you dies, it’ll be one less traitor to deal with.”

“I’m not a traitor!” Berryheart hissed. “And neither is Yarrowleaf!”

“Is that true?” Splashtail’s mew was icy. “Is that *really* true?”

“Can we just calm down?” There was fear in Berryheart’s mew now.

Sunbeam realized that she was trembling. Panic was pounding in her ears.

“Get rid of her.” Splashtail nodded to his warriors and turned away. “I’m going back to the camp. You’re in charge here, Owlnose.”

Sunbeam watched, frozen, as the false RiverClan leader padded out of the ShadowClan camp. Perhaps it was good he’d left. Owlnose might relent without Splashtail watching him.

But the brown tabby tom was staring at Berryheart with cold fury. “Splashtail killed Harelight for you, and how do you repay him?”

“Splashtail killed Harelight because he was *weak*,” Berryheart snapped. “Don’t fool yourself. He would have killed him whether I was there or not.”

“He wasn’t weak!” Owlnose’s gaze flashed with rage. “*You’re* weak. You lie and you betray. How dare you pretend you were a Clanmate. You’re not RiverClan! You never were!” With a snarl, he leaped at Berryheart. As he slammed into her, Nightsky and Lizardtail charged forward and began slashing at her flanks.

Sunbeam swallowed back a wail. Horror surged through her like a storm, but she forced herself to stay where she was as her mother ducked into a defensive crouch. *She’ll be okay. She just needs to run.* If Berryheart could make it to the entrance, she could outpace these cats. She knew the pine forest far better than they did.

But Berryheart didn’t run. With a yowl, she turned and slashed at Nightsky. “Do you think I stood up to Tigerstar just to be beaten down by a gang of mangy RiverClan cats?”

Sunbeam watched in disbelief. Why was her mother taunting them? *You can’t win this!*

Nightsky dodged the blow. She darted forward and bit into Berryheart’s forepaw. Berryheart shook Nightsky off and threw a swipe at Lizardtail. “Is that the best you can do?”

Lizardtail ducked. With a growl, he aimed a blow that caught the fur above Berryheart's eye.

"Surely a traitor should be better at fighting," Owlnose mocked. He swiped at Berryheart, catching her cheek with his claws.

Berryheart snarled at the three RiverClan warriors. "If you were any good at fighting, you'd face me one at a time."

"We're not scared of *you*." Lizardtail hit her again. Blood was streaming around her eyes.

Stop it! Sunbeam silently begged the RiverClan cats. *She's had enough. Let her go.*

Owlnose reared and slammed his paws down on Berryheart's spine. She collapsed but rolled, leaped to her paws, and flung herself at the brown tabby tom. Grabbing him, she pulled him down and began to churn his belly with her hind legs. Nightsky and Lizardtail dug their claws into her pelt and dragged her away from him. Lizardtail pinned her shoulders to the ground while Nightsky slashed at her with outstretched claws. Owlnose leaped to his paws, lunged at her, and, gripping her hind leg between his teeth, dragged her across the ground. She flailed desperately and, as she tried to twist free, exposed her throat.

Lizardtail slashed at it. As he tore out a clump of fur, Sunbeam's breath caught in her throat. *They want to kill her.* Terror sent energy surging beneath her pelt. She fought her way from the brambles. Owlnose turned in surprise. She flung herself at him and sent him staggering back. Podlight raced to help, steadying him before he could fall.

Sunbeam darted to Berryheart's side. Why wasn't ShadowClan helping? She shot a look of desperation toward the ShadowClan warriors, but they only watched in dismay. Cloverfoot blinked at her.

"Help us!" Sunbeam wailed.

"I'm coming!" Spireclaw began to dart forward, but Blazefire grabbed his scruff with his claws and jerked him back.

"She wanted Splashtail to kill Tigerstar," he hissed.

"What about Sunbeam?" Spireclaw looked helplessly at his sister.

"They'll hurt the kits if we interfere!" Blazefire eyed Graysludge and Minnowtail, still at the nursery entrance.

Sunbeam looked back at Owlnose. There was blood welling beside his ear. Nightsky and Lizardtail flanked him as Podlight fell in behind. The gazes of the RiverClan cats were fixed on Berryheart.

“Let her go,” Sunbeam begged.

“She’s betrayed two Clans,” Owlnose snarled.

Sunbeam stood in front of her mother. “She didn’t realize what she was doing. She’ll make up for it. It was all a mistake. Please just __”

Nightsky charged forward, throwing herself at Sunbeam with such force that even though Sunbeam dug her paws hard into the ground, the attack sent Sunbeam rolling onto her side. She felt the weight of the RiverClan warrior crushing her, felt claws rake her flank. Struggling to throw her off, Sunbeam curled her claws into the earth and hauled herself onto her belly. With a shriek, she pushed up with all her might. Claws ripped her pelt, but she felt Nightsky fall away and turned. Horror pulsed through her as she saw Podlight and Lizardtail aiming blow after blow at her mother while Berryheart lay on the ground.

Sunbeam dived toward her as Owlnose lunged. She heard his snarl, heard his teeth snap at her ear as she threw herself between him and her mother. He reared, his face contorted in rage. Sunbeam saw his paw swinging toward her. She saw his claws glint as the first rays of sun cut between the trees, and closed her eyes. Then she felt her mother’s paws jab her side. She felt them shoving her away. Staggering in surprise, she stumbled and fell, not taking her gaze from Owlnose for a moment.

The RiverClan tom’s claws sliced down, cutting through the air where Sunbeam had been a moment ago, and slashed Berryheart’s throat.

For a moment Sunbeam thought he’d missed. Berryheart seemed to freeze. She stared up blankly at Owlnose. Blood began to well at Berryheart’s throat, then pour, then pulse out of her like spring water. The ground turned red beneath her, and Berryheart slumped onto her side.

“No! No!” Sunbeam stared as time seemed to slow around her. “Shadowsight!” She glanced toward the ShadowClan medicine cat,

who was gazing in horror at Berryheart. He blinked at her helplessly. There was nothing he could do.

Berryheart was dead.

Owlnose padded toward Sunbeam, his eyes narrow, his gaze cold. “Do you want to go on?” he growled.

Sunbeam felt frozen. Lifting her head to look at the RiverClan tom seemed nearly impossible as she fought back grief that felt heavier than the whole forest. Fury churned in her belly. Part of her wanted to kill him for what he’d done. Part of her wanted the violence to end. Part of her hoped that this was just a dream, a hideous nightmare she’d wake up from. “I just want this to stop,” she whispered.

Owlnose’s pelt twitched along his spine. “So do I,” he growled. “I’m sick of cats using RiverClan for their own ends. I’m sick of watching my Clanmates die so that traitors can live.” He stared at Sunbeam, grief darkening his eyes. “I regret the day I turned back from the Moonpool. I should have taken responsibility. I should have agreed to be RiverClan’s leader. If I had, none of this would have happened.”

Sunbeam watched him, torn between anger and sorrow. She felt a flank brush hers and felt a muzzle nudging her away. It was Spireclaw.

“Why didn’t she run away?” she asked him bleakly. “Why did she have to die?”

“She wasn’t in her right mind,” he mewed quietly.

“She had a plan.” Sunbeam knew as she said it that she was clutching at thistledown. “She was going to lead ShadowClan.” It sounded ridiculous now.

“Do you really think ShadowClan would have made her leader after everything she’d done?” Spireclaw mewed gently.

“No.” Sunbeam swallowed back a sob.

“She was the only one who couldn’t see that she’d taken the wrong path,” he mewed. “She was the only one who didn’t know she’d reached a dead end.”

“So she *had* to die?” Sunbeam looked at him. Had he already given up on their mother?

“There was no other path for her,” Spireclaw told her gently. “She must have known that on some level.”

Sunbeam felt suddenly cold. “What about *us*?” It felt as though Berryheart had taken a path that would lead her away from her Clan and her friends and her kits. “Didn’t she care that it would take her away from us?”

“I don’t know.” Spireclaw’s gaze suddenly rounded with affection. “All I know is that the last thing she ever did was save you.”

Grief welled up in Sunbeam’s throat. She felt dizzy with it. It seemed to press at the edge of her thoughts like shadows so deep she couldn’t see beyond them. She turned. The RiverClan cats had backed away from her. Their rage had gone like a storm clearing. Now Nightsky’s eyes shone with pity. Podlight and Lizardtail looked away. Owlnose’s gaze followed her as she padded back to her mother’s body and crouched beside it.

Berryheart’s fur was still warm, and Sunbeam moved closer, breathing in the familiar scent, closing her eyes, and imagining for a moment that she was still in the nursery the night before her apprentice ceremony, pressing against her mother’s belly, excited about receiving her new name, wondering what it would be like to sleep in the apprentices’ den without Berryheart’s breath warming her ears. Her heart seemed to twist in her chest. She’d never feel her mother’s breath again. She’d never smell her scent.

Berryheart was gone.

Chapter 9

“This way!” Frostpaw took the lead as the WindClan patrol crossed the scent line at the edge of the moor onto ThunderClan territory. She looked over her shoulder at them, wishing that Harestar and his warriors would run instead of walking. Did they think they were here to enjoy the view? But the WindClan leader seemed determined not to be rushed.

He’d already warned her to slow down when she’d tried to hurry the patrol out of camp at dawn. “We have to deal with this calmly,” he told her. He’d insisted on eating before they left. He’d insisted *she* eat too and had given her a rabbit from the fresh-kill pile. What was she supposed to do with a rabbit? It was nearly half her size. And how could she swallow? She was far too anxious. She’d swapped it for a vole and forced it down as quickly as she could to keep Harestar happy, then paced at the entrance until at last the WindClan leader licked his lips and stood up. “Panic will make us clumsy,” he’d told her as he led Crowfeather, Nightcloud, and Emberfoot out of camp along with Appleshine and Woodsong. “And this situation is too serious for any mistakes.”

Harestar had already sent another patrol to free Tigerstar. He’d decided three warriors would be enough to keep the RiverClan guards busy while Tigerstar and his cats crossed the tree-bridge, and he’d told Heathertail, Brindlewing, and Songleap to make sure that once Tigerstar and the others had been freed, their RiverClan guards wouldn’t be able to reach Splashtail to warn him.

“You won’t hurt them?” Frostpaw had asked before they left. She didn’t want any more of her Clanmates to suffer, no matter what they’d done.

“Not unless we have to,” Heathertail had told her.

Now she pushed on, tracing a route through the oak forest, up a rise she knew would lead them to the ThunderClan camp. She should be tired. The nest she’d been given in the medicine den had been as warm as she’d hoped. But she hadn’t been able to steal more than a few snatches of sleep. Each time she drifted off, a memory would jerk her awake—Harelight’s death, RiverClan

warriors bursting from the water beneath the tree-bridge, Berryheart racing for the ShadowClan forest. And each time she woke, her fear and sense of helplessness deepened, until she gave up trying to sleep and crept from her nest in search of fresh air to calm her. She'd waited alone in the dark at the edge of the clearing for dawn to finally show beyond the distant pines and for WindClan to wake.

She could barely feel the tiredness she knew must be deep beneath her fur. Fear drove her on. She had to save Tigerstar. She had to save ShadowClan. She had to save RiverClan.

"It's just at the bottom of this slope," she called back to Harestar, willing him to hurry.

The WindClan leader looked down toward the hollow hidden beyond the thorn barrier. As he did, Lionblaze slid from the camp entrance. He looked up at Harestar. His eyes lit up. "You've come." He hurried to meet them. "Squirrelstar was about to send a message."

"Frostpaw came to fetch me," Harestar told him.

Frostpaw shifted impatiently as Lionblaze blinked at her with relief. "I'm glad you're safe," he told her. "Mothwing's been worried about you."

"Mothwing?" Frostpaw felt a spark of surprise. Wasn't she in the ShadowClan camp? "Is she here?"

"She arrived last night with Duskfur."

"Did Nightheart and Sunbeam bring her?" Had they managed to get out of the ShadowClan camp too before Splashtail invaded? Frostpaw didn't wait for an answer. She wanted to see for herself.

The ThunderClan camp was bathed in sunlight. Bayshine was showing Bristlepaw a battle move, and Stempaw and Graypaw were pulling stale bedding from the elders' den. The rest of the Clan was sharing prey around the clearing, as though it were an ordinary day. Frostpaw's heart quickened as she saw Mothwing sitting beside Duskfur outside the medicine den. She hurried toward them. "Where are Nightheart and Sunbeam?"

"They didn't—"

Mothwing started to get to her paws, but Alderheart poked his head from the medicine den. "You're supposed to be resting," he told

her. There were fresh herbs dressing the RiverClan medicine cat's wounds.

As Mothwing obediently settled back down, Duskfur blinked solemnly at Frostpaw. "We think Sunbeam is still in the ShadowClan camp," she mewed. "We don't know where Nightheart is."

Alarm flickered through Frostpaw's fur. Then she noticed two kits chewing on a mouse behind Duskfur. They smelled of SkyClan. "Who are you?" she asked.

The auburn she-kit looked up. "I'm Ridgekit."

"I'm Duskkit," mewed the white tom-kit beside her.

Had Splashtail attacked SkyClan too? "Why are you here?" Frostpaw asked them.

"RiverClan cats tried to steal us," Duskkit told her.

"*You* smell like RiverClan." Ridgekit narrowed her eyes. "Are you here to steal us too?"

Frostpaw paused, feeling a stab of grief. Was that how the other Clans would think of RiverClan now—a Clan of kit-stealers? "I'd never steal a kit," she mewed.

Puddleshine padded from the medicine den. Frostpaw blinked in surprise. Last time she'd seen the ShadowClan medicine cat, he'd been heading alone to the RiverClan camp. "You're safe!" Relief washed her pelt.

"The RiverClan camp was practically deserted when I got there," he told her. "I headed home, but there was RiverClan scent all over the ShadowClan border, so I came here." His eyes were dark. "What happened to Tiger—" Before he could finish, grit showered down from the tumble of rocks leading up the Highledge.

"Frostpaw!" Squirrelstar cut in, bounding down into the clearing. "Are you okay? I heard you left camp with Tigerstar. Is he with you?" The ThunderClan leader glanced hopefully toward the camp entrance, stiffening as Harestar padded in with his patrol. *"Harestar!"* She looked surprised.

The WindClan leader stopped at the edge of the clearing and greeted her with a nod. "We've come with news," he mewed.

"Good," Squirrelstar mewed. "We need to—"

"When are we going home?" Ridgekit interrupted.

“Very soon, I hope.” Squirrelstar’s gaze flitted back to Harestar. “We need to share what we know. A lot has happened, and we need to make sure we have our paws on the same prey. Come with me.” With a flick of her tail she beckoned Frostpaw, Puddleshine, and Duskfur to follow her. As Mothwing started to get to her paws once more, she nodded for her to stay back. “Stay there and rest,” she told her. She crossed the clearing and stopped beside Harestar.

“Tigerstar is being held captive on the island,” the WindClan leader told her.

“Mothwing and Duskfur must have told you that Berryheart came to the ShadowClan camp,” Frostpaw explained. “And that Tigerstar took a patrol to help RiverClan. Gorseclaw met us on the shore. He said Splashtail had fled to the island. Tigerstar wanted to take Splashtail prisoner, but it was a trap. There were RiverClan warriors waiting under the bridge. They forced us onto the island and wouldn’t let us off. I swam to get help, but the others are still there.”

“I’ve sent a patrol to release them,” Harestar mewed. “They should be there soon.”

“Good.” Squirrelstar nodded at Duskfur. “Tell us what happened at the ShadowClan camp after Frostpaw left.”

“Splashtail attacked with Berryheart and all his warriors,” Duskfur mewed.

Frostpaw’s heart sank. Had she been secretly hoping that RiverClan would have refused to do something as fox-hearted as attack another Clan’s camp, where there were kits and elders? “We guessed that was his plan.”

“With Tigerstar out of camp, they didn’t stand a chance,” Duskfur went on. “Sunbeam hid me and Mothwing in a gully. Then Nightheart came to find us.”

“Alone?” Frostpaw’s belly tightened. “Wasn’t Sunbeam with him?”

“She stayed behind to help ShadowClan,” Duskfur told her. “Nightheart took us over the border. We were heading for ThunderClan, but we found a RiverClan patrol stealing SkyClan kits.”

Frostpaw caught Duskfur’s eye. Was she ashamed too that their Clanmates were stealing kits now? Frostpaw’s pelt burned with humiliation. It was a feeling she never wanted to experience again.

“Nightheart went to rescue them while we hid,” Duskfur continued. “The kits found us and we brought them here, but we couldn’t find Nightheart.”

Harestar frowned. “Do you think the RiverClan patrol took him?”

“It’s the only thing that would have kept him away,” Squirrelstar mewed.

“He might have gone back to ShadowClan to help Sunbeam,” Frostpaw suggested.

“Not without telling Duskfur his plan,” Squirrelstar pointed out.

Harestar’s tail was flicking. “So we must assume that Splashstar controls the ShadowClan camp now.”

“Splash*tail*,” Frostpaw corrected him. “StarClan never gave him nine lives.”

Squirrelstar looked anxious. “Let’s also assume that Sunbeam is being held hostage along with the rest of ShadowClan, and that Nightheart is being held in RiverClan.”

Frostpaw felt a fresh flash of panic. While they were in Splashtail’s paws, Sunbeam and Nightheart weren’t safe. *No cat* was safe. “We need to rescue them.”

“We will.” Squirrelstar’s ears twitched angrily. “At least Splashtail has shown his true colors,” she mewed. “We can stop stalking around him, hoping a true warrior lies beneath his fox-pelt.” She flexed her claws. “I just wish I hadn’t given him the benefit of the doubt so often. It wouldn’t have come to this.”

Harestar’s eyes darkened. “We couldn’t have moved against him without proof.”

“Now we have it.” Squirrelstar lashed her tail. “We can finally act and put an end to his troublemaking.” She glared sternly at Harestar. “I assume you’re with me this time?”

“Of course,” he answered. “Now that I’m certain it’s the right thing to do.”

“Good.” Squirrelstar whisked her tail. “I’ll send a patrol to SkyClan. Leafstar will want to know what’s happening and that Ridgekit and Duskkit are safe. With any luck she’ll send warriors to help us.”

“Let’s ask her to meet us with a patrol at the ShadowClan border,” Harestar mewed. “Freeing ShadowClan is a priority.”

“Hopefully, Splashtail will be in their camp.” Squirrelstar plucked at the ground with her claws. “We can confront him straightaway.”

“If not, we can move on to the RiverClan camp,” Harestar mewed. “With every Clan against him, Splashtail will have to give up.”

Excitement sparked in Frostpaw’s paws. At last the leaders were acting, and they were acting fast. And yet she felt cautious. “Then what?” She glanced from Harestar to Squirrelstar. “What will we do with him if he gives up?”

“We should—” Squirrelstar broke off.

Duskfur was looking at her. “Isn’t that for RiverClan to decide?”

“Of course.” Squirrelstar dipped her head apologetically.

What if there’s no RiverClan left to decide? Foreboding moved like a shadow beneath Frostpaw’s pelt. “We need to make sure any attack on the RiverClan camp is fast,” she mewed. “I want as few RiverClan cats hurt as possible. We need to win the battle before Splashtail has chance to fight it.” A thought was sparking at the back of her mind.

Squirrelstar narrowed her eyes. “Do you have an idea?”

“I know a way into the RiverClan camp that no RiverClan warrior will expect.” Her thoughts were racing. “I would only need a few warriors with me,” she mewed. “The main patrol can rush the entrance, but RiverClan won’t be prepared for a second patrol coming in from the river.”

“The river?” Harestar looked puzzled. “Our warriors can’t swim.”

“They won’t need to,” Frostpaw explained. “We can wade. I know a route up from the lake, through the shallows. The current will wash our scent away. We’ll be able to get right up to the camp wall without being detected.”

Duskfur’s eyes lit up. “I know the route you mean!”

Harestar and Squirrelstar exchanged glances.

“It should be a joint patrol,” Squirrelstar began. “The strongest warriors from each Clan and—”

Frostpaw interrupted. “I know who can do it.” She’d already decided who would be most effective at sneaking up on the RiverClan camp. She looked at Harestar. “Can I take your patrol?” she asked. “The one you sent to free Tigerstar?”

“Of course.” He looked surprised. “Will it be enough?”

“Tigerstar’s patrol will be there too,” Frostpaw reassured him.

Squirrelstar was frowning. “I’m not sure you should lead it, Frostpaw.”

“I know the way.”

“But you’re an apprentice,” Squirrelstar pressed. “And a medicine cat. You don’t have enough experience to lead a patrol.”

“It is only the circumstances of recent moons that has kept Frostpaw an apprentice,” Duskfur pointed out. “She’s a capable cat. Don’t forget, she’s had warrior training.”

Frostpaw nodded. “And Tigerstar will be with me.”

Squirrelstar looked thoughtful. “What do you think, Harestar? Should we let her try?”

“StarClan has shown their faith in her by sending her on a mission,” Harestar mewed. “We should have faith in her too.”

“Okay.” Squirrelstar looked at Frostpaw. “But be careful. Stay close to Tigerstar.”

“I will.” Frostpaw’s heart was pounding. Was faith enough? “I promise I won’t let anyone down.” She headed for the thorn tunnel. *Please, StarClan, give me strength.* Was Riverstar watching her? Did *he* still have faith in her? *I can do it,* she promised him silently. *I’m going to save RiverClan.*

Chapter 10

Nightheart's fur bristled. Splashtail had taken the kits. Havenpelt was watching through the brambles choking the nursery entrance. He could see her flexing her claws, in and out, and the muscles twitching along her flanks as she stared across the clearing toward Splashtail's den.

The false RiverClan leader had returned to the camp before dawn. He'd brought so many of his warriors back with him that Nightheart had wondered who was left to guard the ShadowClan camp. Then he'd realized that Splashtail would be using ShadowClan's kits to control its warriors just as he was doing with Havenpelt's here in RiverClan.

Foreboding gnawed in Nightheart's belly. Last night, as he'd plotted with Havenpelt and Mosspelt, escape had felt possible. He'd convinced them that it would be easy for him to protect the kits here in the brambled nursery. All they had to do was spread word through the camp that he'd guard them with his life. There would be no reason left for RiverClan to obey Splashtail. They could finally turn on their vicious leader.

Now, as the sun lifted above the reed beds and Havenpelt stared helplessly across the clearing to where her kits were being held, Nightheart was pinning his hopes on rescue from the other Clans. He knew that Tigerstar, whom he'd feared had been attacked by Splashtail on his way to help RiverClan, was alive. But he was trapped on the island. Nightheart had overheard Splashtail ordering Shimmerpelt and Mistslime to take over guarding Tigerstar on the tree-bridge. But Sunbeam might have escaped the ShadowClan camp and raised the alarm.

Mosspelt tried to comfort Havenpelt. "He won't hurt the kits," she mewed hopefully.

She turned on her, her eyes glittering with fear. "Then why did he take them?"

Nightheart felt a pang of pity for the queen. "He just wants to scare the Clan," he told her. As the words left his mouth, he realized how hollow they sounded. *Please let it be true.*

“We’re already frightened enough!” Her mew trembled, and Nightheart wished again that he’d fought to keep the kits from being taken when Breezeheart and Minnowtail had barged into the nursery and dragged them out. But he had not dared risk it. They might have been hurt. *He* might have been hurt too. And he needed to stay alive if he was going to help RiverClan.

Havenpelt’s fur twitched along her spine. “He’s never kept them in his den before.” Her ears pricked. The kits’ whimpering had stopped. “Why are they so quiet?”

Mosspelt wrapped her tail over Havenpelt’s. “They must have realized how worried you’d be if you heard them,” she told her.

“They’re probably terrified,” Havenpelt wailed.

Nightheart’s thoughts quickened. “We might be able to persuade your Clanmates to help rescue the kits.”

“No!” Havenpelt’s panicked gaze flashed toward him. “If we fail, he’ll hurt them.”

He’ll hurt them anyway, Nightheart thought. But he kept his fears to himself. “If we can get the kits away from him, he’ll be powerless. We just need a few RiverClan warriors on our side.”

“What if he hurts them before we reach them?” Havenpelt’s tail was stiff with fear.

Mosspelt pressed closer. “We’re not going to do anything to put them in danger.” She shot a warning glance at Nightheart.

Nightheart looked away. They had to do something! He could see Fognose’s gray-and-white pelt outside. The RiverClan she-cat was guarding the nursery. Last night, Havenpelt had suggested that she might be one of the cats who would turn against Splashtail. Nightheart wasn’t convinced.

“She’s a kit-stealer,” he’d mewed.

“She was just following orders!” Havenpelt had replied hotly. “Don’t forget, she’s my kit. She would do anything she was told in order to protect Floatkit, Rapidkit, and Troutkit. They’re her kin!”

“They’re also Splashtail’s kin,” Nightheart had mewed darkly.

Havenpelt had stuck out her chest defiantly. “Fognose knows right from wrong!”

Then why doesn’t Splashtail? Isn’t he your kit too? Nightheart hadn’t pressed his point. Havenpelt was already suffering enough.

Right now, Fognose was the only warrior close enough to talk to. If Havenpelt was right about her kit, he might be able to convince her to turn on Splashtail. If he was lucky, she could persuade the other warriors to join her.

“Fognose.” He kept his mew low.

She jerked around and glared at him through the brambles.

“Aren’t you hungry?” He could see from here that the fresh-kill pile was empty.

“I’m a warrior,” she sniffed. “Hunger doesn’t bother me.”

“It doesn’t look like Splashtail is taking very good care of his Clan.” Nightheart glanced toward Mallownose practicing battle moves with the other RiverClan warriors. None of them had been allowed to sleep since returning from the battle. “Doesn’t he realize that warriors can only be strong if they eat and sleep well?”

Fognose narrowed her eyes. “Be quiet.”

She didn’t argue. Did she agree? Nightheart nosed his way tentatively through the brambles. “I need to use the dirtplace,” he mewed.

She snarled at him and backed away as he pushed his way out. “You can come with me if you’re scared I’ll try to escape,” he told her.

“You’re staying here!” she snapped.

“Okay.” Nightheart shook out his pelt, relishing the chill of the air after the stuffy den, then sat down and wrapped his tail casually over his paws.

Fognose eyed him warily. “You can’t use the dirtplace until there’s a warrior free to escort you.” She looked toward her Clanmates. “I’ll call—”

“No rush.” Nightheart interrupted her. “I really only needed some fresh air. I’ll go back inside once I’ve cooled off. The stink in there is pretty bad. Doesn’t Splashtail make the apprentices change the bedding?”

“RiverClan has no apprentices,” Fognose growled.

“Oh, yes.” Nightheart blinked at her calmly. “Havenpelt told me. Mistpaw and Graypaw are warriors now. Mistslime and Graysludge.” He mewed their new names thoughtfully. “I suppose they’ll be stuck with those names forever.” He glanced at Fognose. “It was a bit cruel, wasn’t it?”

She glared back at him. “They deserve rotten names. Their mother and their sister are traitors.”

“But Mistslime and Graysludge have been loyal to Splashtail. You’d think he’d reward them for that. I guess Splashtail’s not too bothered about how his warriors feel as long as they follow orders.”

Fognose didn’t speak. *Have I touched a nerve?*

He went on. “Is that why you stole the SkyClan kits? Because you were scared you’d end up being called Fogdung?”

“Splashtail would never—”

“Are you sure?” Nightheart cut her off. “It sounds exactly like something he’d do.” She was watching him, her ears flicking uneasily. “Spiteful names, no food, endless training. Life in RiverClan doesn’t seem like much fun. Wouldn’t you be happier if you had a different leader?”

“There isn’t anyone else.” Fognose avoided his gaze.

“Surely there’s someone better than Splashtail,” he pressed. “All you need is a leader who can make sure the fresh-kill pile is full. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Fognose glanced toward the empty patch of ground where the fresh-kill pile should have been. “I guess it would be nice to taste *fresh* fish.”

“And it would be nice not to have to fight, wouldn’t it?” Nightheart’s paws were prickling. *Am I pushing my luck?* He had to. She was listening to him. He had to keep going. “I mean, all these battles are hard work, and those scratches must sting.” He glanced at the claw marks along her flank. “Especially with no medicine cat to treat them.”

“We’ve got Podlight.” But Fognose didn’t sound very confident in the fake RiverClan medicine cat.

“The only reason you’re hungry and beaten up is because Splashtail’s in charge,” Nightheart mewed. “If you could get rid of him, life would be much more peaceful. You could hunt and share tongues again, instead of fighting all the time.”

Fognose bristled. “I’m a *warrior*.”

“But a *true* warrior only fights when they have to.” He glanced toward Splashtail’s den. “And they don’t threaten kits.”

Fognose's gaze suddenly hardened. "You should get back in the den."

Had he gone too far? "I can tell you don't *want* to harm kits," he mewed quickly. "It's obvious Splashtail is bullying you into going against your real nature. Havenpelt told me that you're nothing like your brother. If you were leader, you'd make sure the kits stayed safe in the nursery." She leaned closer, and Nightheart's pulse quickened. She looked interested. "If we unite," he pressed, "we could protect them. We could get rid of Splashtail. Things could be like they used to be, before everything started to go wrong."

Fognose's gaze suddenly flitted around the camp as though she was afraid of being overheard, but she didn't try to shut him up.

He kept going. "If the whole of RiverClan turned against Splashtail, he couldn't win. You could drive him out. You could make RiverClan into a real Clan again. Don't you want that?"

Hope surged in Nightheart's belly as Fognose slowly nodded.

"Hey!" Gorseclaw's mew rang across the clearing. "You!" Nightheart swung around. The white tom padded toward him, his tail flicking angrily. "What's going on here?" he snarled at Fognose. "This cat should be in the nursery."

Fognose's ears twitched guiltily.

"What were you two talking about?" Gorseclaw peered at her.

Nightheart sniffed. "I was just asking if I could use the dirtplace. Fognose said I'd have to wait."

Gorseclaw narrowed his eyes. "You've been talking a long while just to ask to use dirtplace. What were you really talking about?"

"We were just chatting while I waited for someone to escort me." Nightheart glanced at Fognose, willing her to back him up, but she didn't speak.

A growl rolled in Gorseclaw's throat. "Perhaps you should explain yourself to Splashstar."

Alarm sparked in Nightheart's pelt. "I just wanted to—"

Gorseclaw shoved him toward Splashtail's den, which was woven into the roots of a willow at the far side of the clearing.

This wasn't what he'd planned. Nightheart dragged his paws, but Gorseclaw shoved him harder. His thoughts whirled. Perhaps this was his chance. He could confront Splashtail directly. And the kits

would be there. He could protect them. But it would only work if Fognose backed him up and the others followed her lead. Had he said enough to convince her? He looked back at the gray-and-white she-cat, but she avoided his gaze.

"They don't understand!" Splashtail's mew suddenly rang out from his den.

Nightheart pricked his ears. Who was he talking to? The kits?

"Only I can protect us."

It didn't *sound* like he was talking to kits. It sounded like he was talking to another warrior.

Splashtail's mew grew angrier. "I sacrificed everything to become leader! Because RiverClan needed me!"

Gorseclaw eyed the den warily.

"Is there someone in there with him?" Nightheart asked.

"He must be practicing a speech." Gorseclaw didn't sound convinced.

Splashtail's mew had risen to a yowl. "I'm going to protect them as long as I have claws and teeth, and you can't stop me! Nothing you say will change what's going to happen!"

As they reached the den, Gorseclaw seemed to hesitate. Then he nudged Nightheart again. "You can go in first."

Nightheart looked at the white tom. "You're the one who wants to see him."

"Get in there!" Gorseclaw lashed out, his claws nicking Nightheart's ear.

Nightheart's paws suddenly felt heavy. He didn't want to step into a den with a raving cat. But Gorseclaw was glaring at him. Squaring his shoulders, Nightheart padded into the willow den.

Splashtail whirled around, his eyes wild. He looked as though he'd been possessed by a Dark Forest warrior, staring at Nightheart with such hostility that Nightheart thought he was going to attack at any moment. But he didn't move. Instead he looked puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

"Gorseclaw brought me." Nightheart forced his pelt to smooth. Fear was twisting his belly. Then he saw the kits huddled together at the back of the den, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. His fear melted away. He had to protect them.

He blinked at them encouragingly. “Hey?” He forced a purr. “Are you okay?”

They stared back wordlessly, pressing harder against the back of the den.

“Gorseclaw!” Splashtail called through the entrance.

The white warrior hurried in.

“Why did you bring him?” Splashtail snarled.

Gorseclaw hesitated, clearly unnerved by Splashtail’s aggression. “Nightheart’s been talking to Fognose.”

“So?” Splashtail blankly stared at Gorseclaw. “Is that *my* problem?”

“I—I th-thought you’d want to know.” Gorseclaw’s confidence had evaporated.

“Don’t bring me *trivial* matters!” Splashtail was furious. “I’m trying to run a Clan!”

By frightening kits? Nightheart quietly flexed his claws, but with two warriors here, he knew he couldn’t fight *and* protect the kits.

“Take him away!” Splashtail ordered Gorseclaw.

“But what if he’s trying to turn her against you?” Gorseclaw asked anxiously.

“If you’re so worried, kill him.”

Nightheart stiffened. He didn’t mean it, surely!

Gorseclaw stared at his leader as though he’d heard wrong. “But __”

“Don’t you want to?” Splashtail tipped his head to one side. The menacing gleam in the false leader’s eyes told Nightheart that he wasn’t being curious. He was testing Gorseclaw’s loyalty.

“I—I—” Gorseclaw was lost for words.

Splashtail’s eyes became slits. “Are you disobeying an order?”

“No!” Gorseclaw backed away. “I just thought . . .” His mew dried up as Splashtail kept staring, his gray-green eyes unblinking.

Nightheart wondered whether to run. He might be able to cross the clearing and get out of the camp before the RiverClan cats had a chance to stop him. Could he outpace them on marshy ground, though? Should he risk it? As he hesitated, Gorseclaw began nudging him out of the den. Fear hollowed Nightheart’s belly as he saw Mallownose outside. Breezeheart, Sneezecloud, and

Brackenpelt crowded around them, clearly curious about what was happening in the leader's den. There was no way to escape.

The warriors shifted uneasily as Nightheart padded from the den. Gorseclaw was trembling.

He doesn't want to kill me. Nightheart felt a desperate flicker of hope. Could he persuade these cats that Splashtail was crazy? And that any warrior who followed his orders must be crazy too? He faced Gorseclaw, digging his paws into the ground. "You don't have to do this," he mewed.

"Be quiet." Gorseclaw's tail began to swish.

"Can't you see this is getting out of control?"

"Shut up!" Gorseclaw hissed.

"Gorseclaw." Mallownose took a step forward. "Maybe we should think about this." As he spoke, one of the kits began to wail. Mallownose froze for a moment, then tried again. "Perhaps Splashstar didn't mean it."

"What's taking so long?" Splashtail had followed them from his den. His gaze fixed on Gorseclaw.

Gorseclaw seemed to flinch.

Please! Nightheart stared at him. *No more cats need to die.* His heart was pounding. He seemed caught in a dream. How could this be happening? This was a Clan. Gorseclaw was a warrior, for StarClan's sake. How could he kill another cat in cold blood?

Gorseclaw's tail swished back and forth stiffly. Nightheart realized he was trying to force himself to attack. He sensed every hair on the white warrior's pelt shriveling at the thought of carrying out his leader's orders.

Splashtail growled. "Don't you want to kill him?"

Gorseclaw didn't answer.

Splashtail turned away. "Okay."

Nightheart felt a flash of hope. Had Splashtail backed down?

The false RiverClan leader was heading back into his den. "If you're not going to kill that mangy squirrel-chaser, I'm going to kill a kit."

Shock pulsed along Nightheart's spine. He saw the other warriors stiffen, their eyes wide with disbelief. *Can't you see how crazy he is?* As Splashtail ducked to go inside, Nightheart unsheathed his claws.

He wasn’t going to let Splashtail hurt a kit! Determination surged in his belly as, quivering, he prepared to leap at the false RiverClan leader. Then Splashtail hesitated and glanced around. He looked at Gorseclaw. “Have you changed your mind?”

For a moment, Gorseclaw didn’t move, as though his body had turned to stone.

Nightheart held his breath.

“Okay.” Gorseclaw squared his shoulders and fixed his gaze on Nightheart. “I’ll kill him.”

Horror sparked beneath Nightheart’s pelt. This was really happening. Somewhere beyond the reed bed, Sunbeam was waiting for him. *ThunderClan* was waiting for him. He pushed back fear. If Gorseclaw was going to attack, he’d fight back. He dropped into a battle crouch, eyeing the watching warriors. Could he win? Narrowing his eyes to slits, he lashed his tail. If this was his day to die, he was going to go down fighting. He was going to slash and claw and tear at these fox-hearts until his very last breath.

Chapter 11

Sunbeam could feel sunlight on her pelt but she kept her eyes closed. ShadowClan was waking, shifting quietly around her, talking in whispers, their paw steps nervous. She hadn't moved from her mother's body at the edge of the clearing, and she hadn't slept. While the warmth of the day seeped into Sunbeam's fur, Berryheart held on to the long night's chill. A stone seemed to lie where Sunbeam's heart should be, hard and cold, pressing grief into her chest so fiercely that she could barely breathe. *I shouldn't have joined the fight. I only made it worse. They would have left her alone if I'd held back.* The thoughts swarmed in her mind, stinging her again and again.

If only she'd been able to talk to Berryheart before she'd died. But the moment she'd longed for—when her mother at last realized the mistake she'd made and Sunbeam forgave her—hadn't happened. Would it have happened if Berryheart had lived? Sunbeam would never know. The chance was lost. Her mother was gone, and nothing would change that. They'd never see each other again. They'd never have the conversation she'd imagined so many times. Not even in StarClan. The stone in Sunbeam's chest pressed harder. Was Berryheart already in the Dark Forest?

Even with her eyes closed, she could tell when a RiverClan cat padded past. Unlike ShadowClan, their paw steps were purposeful; they walked with conviction. How could they be so sure of themselves after what they'd done? Sunbeam wondered for a moment whether it was all a dream: Berryheart's treachery, Splashtail's cruelty, the eagerness of RiverClan to follow his orders. How could warriors behave like this? Had they forgotten who they were?

"Hey!" A paw jabbed her in the ribs. "Are you going to lie there all day?"

She opened her eyes and looked blearily at Podlight.

"Do you want to bury her?" His gaze flicked toward Berryheart's body. "There's a patch of earth near the dirtplace. She'd probably fit."

Sunbeam blinked at him numbly.

“I don’t even know why you’re here,” Podlight grunted. “You should have stayed in ThunderClan. That’s where you wanted to be, isn’t it?” His tail was twitching irritably. “I don’t know why cats like you can’t keep out of other Clans’ business. Always putting their whiskers where they don’t belong. It was bound to end in a battle.” He glanced around the clearing where the battered ShadowClan warriors bunched together, their wounds still fresh. “You brought it on yourselves. If ShadowClan hadn’t interfered with RiverClan in the first place, Splashstar would never have gotten so riled up. Why couldn’t you just leave us alone? Splashstar would have had the chance to calm down. Things would never have gotten so bad.”

Riled up. Sunbeam blinked at him. Was that really what Podlight thought? That Splashtail was just angry? That if the Clans had ignored him, he’d have become a smart, reasonable leader like Squirrelstar or Tigerstar? She didn’t have the energy to argue. She didn’t care anymore what RiverClan believed. They’d wrecked ShadowClan and killed Berryheart.

“Well?” Podlight was still staring at her.

Sunbeam closed her eyes and ignored him. Podlight jabbed her in the ribs again. When she didn’t react, he grunted and padded away.

Berryheart hid pinecones around the camp for us to find. The memory rushed at Sunbeam, lifting the stone from her chest for a moment as she pictured chasing after Spirekit and Hollowkit in search of the small cones her mother had tucked among the brambles or in the long grass for them to hunt. In her memory, she could hear the reassuring sounds of ShadowClan around her as the warriors exchanged gossip, compared hunting moves, and bickered amiably over prey while she and her littermates burrowed among the ferns at the edge of the clearing in search of cones.

She wanted to stay here, in her memory, even when paws began to thrum the earth. She didn’t open her eyes as yowls burst around her. She clung tighter to her memory. But reality was crashing in. Paw steps thumped past. A hiss. A shriek. A body thumped against hers. What was happening?

She opened her eyes, jerking her muzzle up as Nightsky rolled, screeching, away from her. Crowfeather was gripping the RiverClan

she-cat like a burr. Finchlight was racing across the clearing. Violetshine stood bristling at the medicine-den entrance. Outside the warriors' den, Hawkwing knocked Lizardtail to the ground. The ShadowClan camp was filling with cats from WindClan, SkyClan, and ThunderClan while the RiverClan cats tried desperately to push them back.

They've come!

Nightheart must have made it home. He must have told ThunderClan what had happened. Sunbeam scrambled to her paws. Where was he? She scanned the clearing. Squirrelstar and Leafstar were here with Harestar and enough Clan warriors to beat back RiverClan. But where was Nightheart? The RiverClan warriors were overwhelmed. Minnowtail and Owlnose cowered against the camp wall. Lizardtail lashed out in panic. Graysludge fled across the clearing. But there was no sign of Nightheart. Was he still outside? Perhaps Squirrelstar had made him stay in the ThunderClan camp? Her breath caught. Was he injured?

ShadowClan warriors leaped to their paws, pushing in among the other Clans, their eyes shining as the RiverClan cats were herded back against the camp wall. They yowled in triumph. Snowbird lunged for Nightsky and raked her ears. Scorchfur snagged Podlight's tail. Cloverfoot limped after them, teeth bared, claws unsheathed.

"Sunbeam!" Sparkpelt dashed toward her. "Are you okay?"

"Where's Nightheart? Is he outside?"

Sparkpelt stiffened.

Sunbeam's heart skipped a beat. "Is he hurt?"

"We don't know where he is," Sparkpelt told her. "He was escorting Mothwing and Duskfur back to our camp and stumbled into a couple of RiverClan warriors stealing SkyClan kits. He went to help. The kits escaped, but we don't know what happened to Nightheart."

Sunbeam froze. Fear rose up like dark water in her belly. She couldn't lose another cat.

Sparkpelt held her gaze. "I'm sure he's fine. He's tough. We're going to find him." The ginger she-cat glanced down at Berryheart's

body. Her eyes rounded with pity. “Oh, Sunbeam.” Her mew was thick. “I’m so sorry.”

Sunbeam’s throat tightened.

“Get back!” Squirrelstar’s mew rang across the camp. “No one is to harm them!”

Sunbeam jerked her muzzle toward the ThunderClan leader. Squirrelstar was facing the ShadowClan warriors, who were snarling at the terrified RiverClan warriors crouched behind her.

ShadowClan’s snarls grew darker, but Squirrelstar held her ground.

Harestar pushed between them and stood beside Squirrelstar. His hard gaze swept over the ShadowClan cats. “Splashtail caused this, not his warriors.”

“We were just following orders,” Owlnose whimpered behind him.

Snowbird glared at the brown tabby tom. “Do you think that’s an excuse?”

Squirrelstar gave a warning look to the ShadowClan cats. “Let’s behave like warriors, not wolves.”

“Harestar is right.” Cloverfoot padded forward. “Without Splashtail, none of this would have happened. It’s *him* we need to speak to.”

“He’s not here!” Yarrowleaf called from the crowd.

“We’re going to RiverClan now to talk to Splashtail,” Harestar told her. “ShadowClan is welcome to join us.” He narrowed his eyes. “But it is not a hunt, and Splashtail is not prey. We only want to make sure he knows he is no longer welcome in the Clans.”

“Kill him!”

“Make him pay!”

“The fox-heart deserves to die!”

The ShadowClan cats’ yowls echoed around the camp.

Sunbeam’s heart was pounding. She couldn’t let their anger tip over into more violence. Enough cats had died. “That’s what Splashtail would say!” she called out. Thorn-sharp gazes flashed toward her, but she forced herself to go on. “We must be better than him.”

“Sunbeam’s right.” Cloverfoot told her Clanmates. “Let’s show him how warriors are supposed to behave.” Her gaze flitted toward

the cowering RiverClan cats. “Let’s show them *all*!”

Owlnose met her gaze, his eyes shimmering. “We had no choice,” he mewed. “You’ve seen what Splashstar’s like.”

Snowbird glared at him. “A warrior always has a choice,” she growled.

Scorchfur flexed his claws. “We’re going to make sure RiverClan never hurts anyone again.”

“Drive them out!”

“Tear their camp down!”

ShadowClan burst into angry yowls.

The RiverClan cats pressed harder against the camp wall, as though they wanted to disappear among the thorns. Only Podlight held his ground. He stood, defiant, and stared at the snarling crowd.

Hawkwing, the SkyClan deputy, pushed his way to the front of the Clan patrol and glared at the ShadowClan cats. “No one will be allowed to harm RiverClan,” he growled. “Our plan is to preserve it. It is one of the Clans. The five Clans must carry on.”

Podlight curled his lip. “‘Preserve’?” he grunted. “The Clans want to march into RiverClan and tell us what to do just like Tigerstar did before. You want to control us.” He met Hawkwing’s gaze. “Haven’t we suffered enough humiliation?”

ShadowClan fell silent as Podlight stared aggressively at the SkyClan deputy. Hawkwing held his gaze, and Sunbeam tensed as the air around her seemed to crackle. ShadowClan began to back away. They could sense a fight, and they seemed to welcome it, their tails flicking excitedly as Hawkwing lifted his hackles and Podlight took a step forward.

Sunbeam glanced at Squirrelstar and Harestar. They were edging toward the camp wall as though making space. Did they want the fight too?

With a hiss, Podlight lunged at Hawkwing. Hawkwing hit out with such a powerful blow that Podlight jerked sideways. Around them, the ShadowClan cats yowled, their eyes glittering. Podlight regained his balance and swung his burning gaze toward Hawkwing, a growl rolling in his throat. He leaped at the SkyClan deputy, his claws stretched, aiming for Hawkwing’s eyes. But Hawkwing seemed to anticipate the attack and ducked, sliding beneath the RiverClan tom

and sweeping his paws from under him. Podlight fell with a thud but scrambled up again and leaped at Hawkwing once more, his pelt bushed with fury. This time he caught the SkyClan deputy's ear with a swipe that spattered blood across the clearing.

Sunbeam held her breath. Why didn't the leaders stop this? Did they think this was the only way to stop ShadowClan from tearing the other RiverClan warriors apart?

Hawkwing flattened his ears as Podlight came at him again. This time the SkyClan deputy sidestepped with such swiftness that it caught Podlight off guard. He stumbled in surprise, and Hawkwing snagged his scruff between his teeth and jerked him backward. With a quick swipe, Hawkwing knocked the RiverClan tom onto his back. Tail lashing, he leaped onto Podlight and pinned his shoulders to the ground. "It's not us you should be fighting," he snarled. "It's Splashtail."

"Never!" Podlight writhed beneath his grip. "RiverClan will never crouch at the paws of the other Clans again! We are stronger than any of you. We'll crush any cat that threatens us."

The RiverClan warrior's eyes were wild with rage. He was as crazy as Splashtail. Were there other cats in RiverClan like this? Sunbeam forced back a tremor of dread.

Hawkwing leaned closer, until his muzzle was a nose-length from Podlight's face. "Can't you see we're trying to help you?"

"Help?" Podlight kicked out desperately but couldn't free himself from Hawkwing's claws. "The Clans have driven us to this. If they'd left us alone, none of this would have happened. We will never back down again! We'll make you sorry you tried to destroy us! You've brought this on yourselves."

Sunbeam saw Owlnose and Nightsky staring at Podlight, their eyes round with horror. Lizardtail looked away, his pelt twitching. Were they ashamed of their Clanmate?

Squirrelstar turned toward them, her gaze dark. "Is this what the rest of RiverClan believes?"

"We don't want to destroy anyone," Owlnose wailed. "We're just scared."

Nightsky nodded. "Splashstar is holding Havenpelt's kits hostage."

His own kin? Sunbeam's heart seemed to drop in her chest.

Graysludge growled. "He says he'll kill them if we don't fight for him."

Splashtail really *was* beyond reason. Sunbeam's thoughts whirled. Was Nightheart in the RiverClan camp? Was he being held hostage too?

Harestar's tail began to flick. "This is going to make it more difficult," he growled.

Squirrelstar nodded. "If we go rushing into the RiverClan camp, the kits might be hurt." She looked solemnly at Owlnose. "Do you really think he'd kill them?"

"Yes." The word seemed to catch in Owlnose's throat.

Sunbeam felt sick. How in StarClan could they rescue kits who were being held hostage by their own Clanmates? But another thought tugged at her mind even harder. If Nightheart was being held hostage in the RiverClan camp, could she reach him before Splashtail hurt him? Her breath quickened. She felt cold. Suddenly it seemed that having the Clans here, ready at last to move against Splashtail, might make things *worse*.

Sunbeam paced the riverbank where the Clan patrol had stopped. Around her, the cats from ThunderClan, SkyClan, and WindClan shifted nervously, waiting for the order to advance, their gazes flicking toward the distant reeds that screened the RiverClan camp. Owlnose, Graysludge, and Minnowtail had come with them, promising to help if the confrontation with Splashtail turned into a battle. There were enough cats here to defeat the remaining RiverClan warriors easily. But defeating Splashtail's warriors wasn't why they'd come. They wanted to drive the false leader from RiverClan without the kits getting hurt.

Sunbeam shivered. The wind was cold. It ruffled her pelt as the sun lifted high into the sky. There was still no sign of Nightheart. It wasn't certain yet that he was RiverClan's hostage. A small part of her had hoped to run into him on the way. The image of Harelight dead in a pool of his own blood kept pushing at the edge of her thoughts. *Harelight was taken by surprise. Nightheart would have had the chance to defend himself.* She had to hold on to hope.

She looked at Squirrelstar. The ThunderClan leader was standing beside Leafstar. “Is it time?”

Squirrelstar glanced at the sky. “I think we should give him a little longer.”

They were waiting for Owlnose to carry out his mission. The RiverClan warrior had offered to go to the camp. He’d said he knew which warriors might support the Clan patrol. If he could talk to them and persuade enough of them to turn against Splashtail, they could avoid a battle RiverClan couldn’t win.

Cloverfoot’s tail twitched. “He’s had plenty of time.” The ShadowClan deputy had come, along with a pawful of ShadowClan warriors. But their wounds were still fresh; they could do little more than observe. Only Hopwhisker and Blazefire were fit enough to fight.

“We need to avoid fighting,” Leafstar had told the patrol before they left the ShadowClan camp. “Our first priority is rescuing the kits. Our second is making sure RiverClan’s casualties are minimal. They need to be able to trust us once Splashtail is gone.”

“After everything that’s happened,” Harestar had mewed grimly, “I fear we will never trust each other again.”

Now Sunbeam wondered whether Crowfeather had caught up to Frostpaw’s patrol. Harestar had sent him to warn them to hold back until the kits were safe. She glanced again at Squirrelstar. Her shoulders ached from the tension. Surely Owlnose had spoken to his Clanmates by now. Why did they have to wait longer? Kits’ lives were at risk. *Nightheart’s life is at risk.* She kept pacing, her heart pounding, driven on by her thoughts.

At last, Harestar swished his tail. “I think we should try now.”

Sunbeam held her breath. Did the others agree? Squirrelstar and Leafstar exchanged looks. They seemed to come to a decision.

“Okay.” Squirrelstar dipped her head.

“Let’s head out.” Leafstar signaled to her warriors with a flick of her tail.

Sunbeam’s pelt sparked nervously. *It’s going to be okay,* she told herself. *Nightheart and the kits will be fine.* She tried to believe it as she followed Squirrelstar and Harestar toward the camp. Pelt brushed pelt as the patrol crowded together on the narrow trail

between the reeds. The mossy path squelched beneath her paws. She could hear a warbler call the alarm as they passed and wondered if Owlnose had managed to convince his Clanmates.

There was no sign of RiverClan warriors as they turned the corner and approached the camp. No patrol. No guard. Only the tunnel opening between the reeds that led into camp. Foreboding wormed beneath her pelt as she ducked through it, jostling with the other warriors as they padded into the clearing.

Gorseclaw was beside the medicine den. His eyes glittered as he saw the patrol. Was that *guilt*? Sunbeam's pelt ruffled. Mallownose gazed at them blankly. Breezeheart looked uneasy but didn't move. None of the RiverClan warriors seemed surprised to see them. Had Owlnose's plan worked? Hollowspring and Sparrowtail stood outside the warriors' den, and Sunbeam tried to catch their eye, but they were looking at their paws. Were they ashamed to be part of this? Were they relieved to see it end?

As the patrol halted, Violetshine and Twigbranch hurried to the nursery. Finchlight, Needleclaw, and Nightcloud followed. No one moved to stop them as they surrounded the thickly brambled den. Only Fognose, who'd been standing at the entrance, lifted her hackles. Her eyes narrowed to slits and Sunbeam could see anger sparking there as she backed slowly away from the advancing warriors. She turned her head toward the willow tree, where Splashtail's den was woven among the roots.

Sunbeam could feel fear throbbing behind her ears. *Where's Nightheart?* It pulsed harder when Splashtail padded from his den. He didn't look surprised to see the patrol. None of them did. Then she saw Owlnose, crouched beside the camp wall. Blood glistened on his pelt as he looked apologetically at Squirrelstar. Sunbeam was surprised to feel a rush of pity for the battered warrior, who she had seen meting out brutal strikes to Berryheart. *At least he tried.*

"Did you really think you could turn my warriors against me?" Splashtail eyed the Clan leaders. His tail swished slowly behind him.

Sunbeam shifted her paws uneasily. *Isn't he scared?* The Clan patrol outnumbered his warriors three to one, and yet Splashtail was gazing at them as though they were no more than a bunch of kittypets who'd wandered into camp by accident.

Harestar took a step forward. “We want you to leave.”

“Leave where?” Splashtail looked back at him coolly. “My camp?”

“The lake,” Harestar growled. “You don’t deserve to be called a warrior. There is no place for you in the Clans. You’re no more than a rogue.”

Splashtail glanced to one side. “Do you hear that?”

Sunbeam frowned, puzzled. He seemed to be talking to someone. She scanned the willow den, but saw no cat standing at the entrance. There was no one near him at all.

“I told you they couldn’t leave us alone.” The false RiverClan leader’s gaze snapped back to Harestar. “You made me do this.”

“No one made you do anything,” Harestar mewed. “You chose this.”

Splashtail’s ears twitched. He looked at Gorseclaw, whose pelt was lifting along his spine. “I told you that it would come to this. I warned you that if we didn’t fight, they’d try to wipe us out.”

“No one wants to wipe RiverClan—” Harestar began.

But Splashtail’s attention had flitted back to the invisible cat beside him. “What was that?” The false RiverClan leader pricked his ears. Sunbeam’s pelt began to ruffle uneasily. He seemed to be listening to someone speaking, even though the camp was silent as the other warriors waited to see what would happen next. Did Splashtail really think there was a cat standing next to him? “I know they can’t be trusted!” He lashed his tail. “You don’t need to tell me. I’m not a fool!”

“It’s over, Splashtail.” Harestar had taken another step forward. “We want you off Clan territory by sunset. Never come back.”

Splashtail dragged his gaze from his imaginary companion. “You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed to protect my Clan,” he snarled at the WindClan leader.

“All you’ve done is cause them harm!” Harestar snarled back.

“It’s thanks to me that they’re here at all! I’m the only one protecting them. I’m a true leader!”

A true leader! Anger flared in Sunbeam’s chest. *He’s a murderer!* If he hadn’t started this, Berryheart would never have been drawn in. She’d still be alive. And where was Nightheart? Sunbeam’s heart pounded harder. Had Splashtail killed someone else she loved? She

suddenly felt dizzy with rage. *If that monster killed Nightheart, I'll kill him.* No cat would be able to stop her from ripping his heart out.

Squirrelstar stepped forward. "How many of your *Clanmates* think you're a true warrior?" she mewed. "Look what you've done to them." She cast her eye around the battle-scarred RiverClan cats.

Splashtail flattened his ears. "I've made my Clanmates strong." The invisible cat beside him seemed to speak, because he jerked his muzzle around again. "It's *true*!" He looked back at Squirrelstar. "They're grateful to me for leading the Clan when no one else could. You think you can come here and take over, but even if we're outnumbered, we'll drive you out. RiverClan is strong. We're better warriors than any of you." His eyes gleamed as he looked around his Clan. He seemed unaware of the defeat in his Clanmates' eyes as they looked back at him. "We're going to fight you!"

"Splashtail." Minnowtail spoke to him gently, almost like a queen reasoning with her kit. "We can't—"

"Don't be scared of these fleabags!" Splashtail snarled at her. "It'll be easy to beat them! Come on! Show them that this is our camp! Show them they're not welcome here!" He looked at her eagerly, then glanced at his other Clanmates. They gazed back at him uncertainly, but none moved. Splashtail seemed to stiffen. He looked puzzled. "Well?" Still, no one moved. The false leader's fur ruffled. He shifted his weight from paw to paw, as though unsure of what to do. Then his gaze darkened. He flexed his claws. "You remember what I said I'd do if you didn't fight." There was a threat in his mew that sent a shiver down Sunbeam's spine. He glanced back at his den. "Come out," he growled sharply.

Sunbeam followed his gaze. Was the cat he'd been talking to in his den? She watched the entrance, wondering who was in there, stiffening as a tiny kit crept out. *They're not in the nursery!* Alarm sparked through her pelt as another kit followed, then another. Their fur was matted, their eyes wide with fear. As they padded fearfully toward him, Splashtail reached out with a paw and grabbed the smallest kit. He swung it up, letting it dangle for a moment from his claw before dropping it and pressing it against the earth.

"Troutkit!" The nursery entrance rustled, and Havenpelt struggled free of the brambles blocking the entrance. Her muzzle was

scratched, her pelt ragged as she made for her kits. But Fognose hooked her scruff with her claws as she tried to pass and dragged her back. Violetshine turned on Fognose, snarling, but Twigbranch nudged her backward, her anxious gaze on Troutkit.

“Your kits are going to help us drive out these squirrel-chasers,” Fognose growled at the terrified queen.

“How can you say that!” Havenpelt stared at her. “I’m your mother! These kits are your kin!”

Fognose pushed her to the ground and held her there as the nursery entrance rustled again.

Sunbeam’s heart soared as she saw Nightheart tear himself free of the brambles. “You’re alive!” Relief swamped her; then she tensed as she saw the long claw marks scarring his pelt and the blood crusted around his nose and ears.

Troutkit squealed as Splashtail pressed him harder to the ground. The false RiverClan leader’s gaze burned as it swept around his warriors. “Well?” he hissed. “Are you going to defend your Clan, or do you expect *me* to do everything?”

His Clanmates were staring, appalled, at Troutkit. They began to move, turning reluctantly to face their invaders. Sunbeam saw them slowly unsheathe their claws and drop one by one into battle crouches. *They don’t want to fight.*

Troutkit gave another squeal.

“Let him go!” Havenpelt tried to fight free of Fognose’s grip.

The Clan patrol faced the RiverClan warriors. They looked puzzled. There was no way RiverClan could win. Sunbeam’s pelt prickled uncertainly. *Are we supposed to fight them?*

“RiverClan or death!” Splashtail’s yowl rang across the camp. His claws were a whisker from Troutkit’s throat.

For a moment no one moved. Then Breezeheart leaped at Harestar. Sneezecloud ducked beneath Shellfur’s belly and heaved him up and off his paws. Minnowtail reared and began batting at Twigbranch and Violetshine.

Sunbeam hesitated; then she heard Nightheart’s yowl. She wheeled around. Nightheart was grappling with Fognose. He’d knocked the RiverClan warrior away from Havenpelt, who was

streaking across the clearing toward her kits. He tried to press Fognose to the ground, but she lashed at him and fought free.

He needs help! Sunbeam ducked past Brackenpelt as the RiverClan she-cat swiped at Emberfoot. Nightheart grabbed Fognose again, threw her backward, and leaped on top of her. As Sunbeam reached them, he grabbed the RiverClan warrior's throat.

"I thought you were going to help the kits!" he hissed.

"I never said I would!" Fognose glared back at him. "You heard what you wanted to hear."

Nightheart pressed her harder into the ground. "Can't you see he's a murderer?"

"He's going to save RiverClan!" she rasped, defiance in her gaze.

"Do you call this *saving* them?" Nightheart sounded exasperated.

"He's going to take us away from here, to a new territory, where we won't ever get bullied again!"

Nightheart's eyes blazed. "Splashtail's the only bully here!" he yowled.

Fognose drew in her hind legs and hooked them under Nightheart's belly. She was going to shove him away.

"Be careful!" As Fognose kicked out, Sunbeam pulled Nightheart clear. She could smell the blood in his fur. As he stumbled away, she hit out at Fognose, slashing her cheek with all her might.

The RiverClan warrior screeched but came back at Sunbeam with a flurry of swipes that made her jerk away, but not in time to avoid a blow that seemed to etch fire along her neck.

Black fur streaked past her as Nightheart launched himself onto Fognose's back. He clung on like brambles as she tried to shake him off. Sunbeam darted forward and slashed her muzzle.

Fognose shrieked and reared, flinging Nightheart off. "You'll never beat me!"

Sunbeam gasped as Fognose hooked her claws deep in her shoulder fur and heaved her onto the ground. The force of it knocked the wind out of Sunbeam. Fognose was on her, scratching and biting, as together they rolled over and over into the throng of fighting cats. Sunbeam caught her breath and kicked out, catching Fognose's belly. Twisting her head, she sank her teeth into

Fognose's leg and bit down hard until the gray-and-white she-cat let go with a shriek.

Sunbeam struggled free and leaped up as Twigbranch turned on Fognose and began to bat her backward. Around them the battle seemed to move in slow motion, as though the warriors were fighting underwater, exchanging blow for blow in a steady, practiced way that made it seem more like training than war.

If I can get Troutkit away from Splashtail, they'll stop fighting. Sunbeam turned toward the false RiverClan leader. Havenpelt had already grabbed two of her kits and was crouching beside the camp wall, sheltering them beneath her belly. But Splashtail still held Troutkit and was pressing him harder to the ground.

"Fight!" Splashtail screeched at his warriors. "If you're going to die anyway, you may as well die as heroes! Don't back down! StarClan won't protect you! It hasn't protected you for moons! They've watched you suffer humiliation after humiliation! This is your chance for revenge! Give your last drop of blood for your Clan!"

Was he really prepared to let them all die for him? Sunbeam raced toward the deluded tom. She gasped as Owlnose sprang from where he'd been cowering and soared like a bird toward Splashtail, and she pulled up as he slammed into the false RiverClan leader. Splashtail staggered backward. As fast as a fish, Owlnose swept Troutkit away with his paw, then lunged again at Splashtail. Troutkit scrambled up and raced for his mother, squealing in terror. Splashtail lashed out at Owlnose with a powerful swipe. Owlnose ducked just in time and butted Splashtail with his head, then sank his teeth into Splashtail's hind leg and tugged it from under him.

As the false RiverClan leader yowled in pain, the battling cats froze. Their gazes flashed toward Splashtail as he tore his leg free and turned on Owlnose. With a snarl, the false RiverClan leader leaped at the brown tabby tom and raked his claws along his pelt. Owlnose grabbed him, and the two toms reared, twisting as each fought to sink his teeth into the other cat's neck. Owlnose kicked out a hind leg and tripped Splashtail. Splashtail staggered but regained his balance as Owlnose let go and dropped onto all fours. With a yowl that sounded like a screech from the Dark Forest, Splashtail grabbed Owlnose's scruff in his claws. He jerked the tabby tom off

his paws and flung him toward the camp wall. Owlnose landed with a grunt and rolled over. Sunbeam gasped as his head struck a stone sticking up from the ground and the tabby tom fell still.

Splashtail seemed to freeze for a moment. Then his gaze swung toward the battle. He stared at his warriors as they stood frozen, staring back at him. His eyes flashed with hatred. “Traitors!” he screeched. He darted toward Havenpelt. She rose up in front of her kits and lifted her paws, ready to swipe at him. But he ducked faster than a snake and snatched a tawny she-kit from behind her. Swinging the tiny bundle up between his teeth, he turned and ran for the camp wall.

“No!” Havenpelt shrieked. “Floatkit!”

Sunbeam watched in horror as he pushed though the reeds. She chased after him. “No!” As she reached the camp wall, she saw him plunge into the river beyond. Floatkit squealed and struggled beneath his chin as the false RiverClan leader swam away.

“He’s escaping!” Sunbeam looked back in panic at the Clan patrol. None of them could swim, but Mallownose charged forward. “You have to stop him!” Sunbeam cried as the light brown tabby tom dived past her into the water, the reeds closing behind him. Sunbeam’s heart pounded. He had to save Floatkit. He *had* to! Splashtail couldn’t be allowed to harm any more cats.

Chapter 12

Frostpaw could hear the screech of battle from the RiverClan camp. Her paws itched to move, to run, to help. She glanced at Crowfeather. “How long do we wait here?”

“Harestar said we should hold our attack until we hear his call.” The WindClan deputy had caught up to them as they’d waded upstream; he was soaked and out of breath, his smoky gray pelt twitching as though it were horrified at being wet.

Whorlpelt, Gullswoop, Stonewing, and Lightleap shifted restlessly on the riverbank, their pelts still damp from the long trek through the shallows. Tigerstar gazed toward the camp. Heathertail, Brindlewing, and Songleap were here too. The three WindClan warriors had made easy work of chasing Shimmerpelt and Mistpaw from the tree-bridge and freeing Tigerstar’s patrol, but now they were impatient to push on to the RiverClan camp.

“They might need us.” Songleap’s tail twitched.

“We’re wasted here,” Brindlewing mewed.

Tigerstar watched the river flowing into the reed bed, his gaze narrow with concentration. “We must wait for Harestar’s signal. It’ll be safer for the kits if we hold back.”

Frostpaw’s heart was thumping. It felt like torture to listen to the screeches of her Clanmates and do nothing. What if Harestar couldn’t get a signal to them? “I can cross the river,” she mewed. “If I can get to the reeds on the far side, I’ll be able to sneak right up the camp wall without being seen. I can find out if Harestar needs help.”

“It’d be dangerous for you to go alone,” Tigerstar told her.

“But I’m the only one who can swim.” He blinked at her. “I’ll stay clear of the fighting,” she promised.

Tigerstar and Crowfeather exchanged looks.

“It would be useful to know what’s happening,” Crowfeather mewed.

“Okay.” Tigerstar looked at Frostpaw. “But come straight back and report to us. You’re not to set paw in the camp.”

“I promise.” Frostpaw hurried toward the water and slithered down the grassy riverbank. She pushed out into the current, fighting

it as it tried to swirl her downstream. Kicking out, she swam for the far side, where reeds swallowed the shore. She pushed in among them, threading herself between the thick stems. This had once been a good hunting place. She'd swum here with Graypaw and Mistpaw, darting after the fish that came to hide from herons. She felt a twinge of longing. It seemed like such a long time ago. They'd had no idea what was going to happen to RiverClan. What would be left after Splashtail had been driven out? Would her Clanmates hunt here again? Would it be as though nothing had ever happened, the past closing behind them like reeds?

The reeds thinned where the river widened and flowed around the camp. From here Frostpaw could see the camp wall clearly. She treaded water, wondering which side to approach. The battle screeches had died down. Was it over? Perhaps it was safe to squeeze through the camp wall and take a look. Perhaps Splashtail had surrendered. She felt a rush of excitement and swam nearer, hope flickering in her chest.

Suddenly, panicked yowls split the air. As Frostpaw watched, her ears pricking, the reeds at the edge of the island burst open. Splashtail barged through and dived into the water. Frostpaw flinched as droplets sprayed her. She blinked them away and saw Splashtail swimming past, something gripped between his jaws. Frostpaw's heart lurched as she took in the sight of a tawny pelt, a tiny body. *It was* a kit, struggling and spluttering and coughing as Splashtail stomped through the water. Hadn't she heard something recently about Havenpelt expecting kits? Could this tiny kit be hers?

He mustn't get away! Frostpaw turned to chase after him, but another cat dived from the island. *Mallownose!* The RiverClan tom crashed down a nose-length away from Frostpaw, almost dragging her underneath. As Mallownose surfaced and began to swim after Splashtail, a third cat leaped in, and Frostpaw had to struggle to keep upright as the water frothed around her. *Fognose!*

The false RiverClan leader was moving fast, the current speeding him along. Fognose struck out after Mallownose. She reached for him and hooked his pelt with her claws, tugging him backward through the water. "Leave him alone!" she screeched. "He's going to make a new start for us!"

“Not with Floatkit!” Mallownose lashed out at Fognose.

Fognose struck back, swiping Mallownose across the face. Blood colored the water as the two grappling warriors sank beneath the surface.

Splashtail’s getting away! Frostpaw began to swim after him as Mallownose and Fognose thrashed among the reeds behind her. Out in open water, the river was swift. It spun her around, and she fought to keep Splashtail in sight as he headed downstream. She ducked beneath the surface, swimming down into the faster current. It caught her, and she let it sweep her downriver until she glimpsed a brown splash of fur above her. She reached out with her hind legs and pushed up against the muddy riverbed, shooting toward the surface. She burst out as Splashtail hauled himself onto the riverbank. His gaze jerked toward her as she swam for the shore. Floatkit was wailing, fighting to get free of his grip.

“Let her go!” Rage surged in Frostpaw’s chest. She heaved herself from the river and scrambled onto the grassy bank a few tail-lengths behind Splashtail.

“Frostpaw!” Lightleap called across the river. The ShadowClan she-cat was racing downriver, streaking ahead of Tigerstar and the patrol as they chased after her. Frostpaw snatched her gaze back to Splashtail. The stepping-stones were close. She only had to keep Splashtail here until the patrol could cross the river and help.

“Leave the kit!” she hissed.

Splashtail’s gaze burned. With a snarl, he dropped Floatkit and pinned her tail with his claws. Floatkit squealed and fought to tear free but couldn’t.

“This kit is just the start,” Splashtail hissed.

Frostpaw’s belly tightened with dread. “The start of what?”

“A new RiverClan.” The false leader’s eyes gleamed. “I’ll find somewhere far away from here and the others will join me. Once they realize the Clans only want to control them, they’ll come. Once they see their land and their independence being stripped away.”

“That will never happen!” Frostpaw stared at him.

“You’re a fool,” he snarled. “The Clans want to destroy us!”

“Of course they don’t!”

“You saw how they let Tigerstar take over!” Splashtail spat. “They couldn’t wait to see RiverClan become ShadowClan’s prey.”

“That’s not true.” How could he be so blind? “The Clans have been trying to help us!”

“You *want* them to take over RiverClan.” Splashtail’s hackles were high. “That’s why you chose Owlnose to be leader. He was the weakest cat you could think of. You wanted to make sure there was no one to defend us.”

“You’re not making any sense!” Frostpaw lashed her tail, exasperated by his paranoia. Panic sparked in her chest. She sensed that the further Splashtail’s reasoning strayed from reality, the more dangerous he’d become. “Why would I want the other Clans to take over RiverClan? I’d defend my Clan with my life!”

“Then why are you fighting beside *them*?” He glanced downstream to where Lightleap was still racing for the stepping-stones, the patrol trailing behind.

“I’m trying to save my Clanmates from *you*!” Frostpaw’s heart felt like it would beat its way out of her chest. How had she ever had feelings for this cat? How had she ever imagined they’d be mates and have kits? “You’re the one they need defending from. You’ve destroyed my Clan. You’ve taken away everything I’ve ever loved.”

“And you’ve done nothing but undermine me.” Hatred shone in his eyes.

“I’m not going to let you take this kit.” She unsheathed her claws.

“Really?” Splashtail curled his lip.

Floatkit was cowering now, huddled at Splashtail’s paws.

“Let her go!” Frostpaw lashed out at him, a swipe so fast it took him by surprise. She sliced his muzzle and shock flashed in his eyes.

“Run!” Frostpaw told the terrified kit as Splashtail lifted his paw to hit back. She dodged his blow. Floatkit stared at her, frozen for a moment, then fled. “Head downstream!” she yowled. “Find Tigerstar!”

Splashtail lunged after the kit but Frostpaw flung herself at him, sending him sideways with her shoulder.

He staggered and turned on her. “Do you really think you can win against a cat with nine lives?”

“You only have *one*!” She swiped at him again. She knew this was a fight she couldn’t win, but she had to keep him from following Floatkit. “Everyone knows the ceremony was a lie. StarClan would never give a fox-heart like you their blessing!”

He came at her hard now, snarling as he flung one swipe after another.

She ducked, dodged, ducked again. Fear flared in her chest as she realized how outmatched she was. A blow caught the side of her head and she jerked sideways, throwing out a paw to stop herself from falling. He raked his claws along her flank, and she gasped as pain seared her pelt. Her wet fur, slicked against her flesh, gave little protection, and she smelled blood as Splashtail opened a long wound across her shoulders. She backed away, trying desperately to remember the moves Harelight had taught her when she’d been his warrior apprentice. She couldn’t think through the panic spiraling in her mind, and she reared blindly, aiming a flurry of blows at Splashtail’s head.

He butted her backward and, with an expert lunge, knocked her hind paws from beneath her. As she thumped onto the ground, he flung himself on top of her. The weight of him took her breath away, and she writhed to escape. She was blind with terror now, her heart pounding with panic as she felt his claws sink into her flanks.

He’s going to kill me. Splashtail was fighting with such fury that she felt like a leaf caught in a storm. She sensed his claws slashing her pelt, but horror numbed the pain. In desperation, she reached up to bite his neck, but he let go and rolled away.

Surprised, Frostpaw scrambled to her paws. Had he given up? Was he going after Floatkit? Relief swamped her as she saw Lightleap.

The ShadowClan warrior was batting Splashtail backward with blow after blow. “The others are coming!” she called to Frostpaw, ducking a swipe that nearly ripped her ear.

“Is Floatkit safe?” Frostpaw yowled.

“They’ll have her by n—”

A vicious swipe by Splashtail turned Lightleap’s mew into a wail. Blood splashed the grass as he tore out a lump of fur from her cheek. She fought back, lashing out at him, her claws stretched, but

he dodged and came at her from the side, shoving her with both paws so hard that she flew backward and skidded across the riverbank.

He lunged at her, but Lightleap was quick. She rolled clear and scrambled to her paws. Frostpaw felt a rush of hope, but Splashtail charged at the ShadowClan warrior again. Lightleap leaped aside before he could hit her. She spun and, hooking her claws into his shoulders, hauled herself up onto his back. She dug her claws in so hard that Splashtail's eyes shone with pain. He tried to throw her off, bucking like a hare, but she clung on.

Frostpaw glanced downstream. Where were the others? She watched, her thoughts whirling as Splashtail tried to shake Lightleap from his back. *Just hold on a little longer!*

Splashtail seemed to freeze. *Has he given up?* Frostpaw wondered. With a growl, he tossed his head back. His skull smacked into Lightleap's chin. Shocked, she let go and he pitched her onto the grass. She landed hard. Splashtail whipped around and lifted a paw to slash her neck as she lay stunned on the ground.

"No!" Frostpaw leaped at him before his claws could reach Lightleap's throat. She barged into him and he turned on her, his face twisted with anger.

"How many times do I have to deal with you!" He came at her like a fox, ears flat, teeth bared. She braced herself as he hit her with one blow, then another. She managed to dodge the third, but he lunged at her and grabbed her, his paws around her chest. Hauling her down onto the ground, he rolled her toward the water's edge. She tried to struggle free, but he held her so fiercely she could barely breathe.

She felt teeth in her neck, claws against her belly and along her flank, and fought back, slashing and ripping at any part of him she could reach. He was going to kill her. In another moment she'd be dead. Her thoughts seemed to stop, and all she knew was panic and the desperate yearning to survive.

Take his balance! Harelight's voice sounded amid the terror. *If a cat can't stand, they can't fight!* It felt like a sliver of light in the darkness. She felt his weight tip and tipped with it, rolling Splashtail onto his side. Pulling her hind paws close, she tucked them against

his belly and ripped at it with her claws, fear hardening her muscles and giving her power she'd never felt before. As he shrieked, she clawed his face, catching his nose and hooking it hard, causing enough pain for him to loosen his grip. She pulled free and scrambled up, terror pulsing with every heartbeat. Splashtail rolled onto his chest and leaped up after her. Then he paused and looked down at his belly. Blood dripped from open wounds, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Did you think I couldn't hurt you?" Frostpaw darted behind him. *If a cat can't stand, they can't fight!* She sliced his heel, feeling her claws break flesh, carve muscle, tear sinew. Splashtail jerked around with a screech, but not before she sliced his other heel. He staggered back, his hind legs collapsing beneath him.

"Frostpaw!" Tigerstar slowed to a halt a few tail-lengths away. Whorlpelt, Gullswoop, and the others pulled up behind him, their eyes rounding in shock as Splashtail fell with a thump onto the ground.

Frostpaw backed away, trembling.

Splashtail's eyes shone with disbelief, and then Frostpaw saw fear. She looked closer. She'd never seen Splashtail look frightened before.

Then his attention seemed to drift. "I'll be free of you now." His gaze seemed to be reaching for someone behind her, but no one was there. "You'll be stuck in the Dark Forest." His mew was growing slurred, weakening with every breath. "I'll be in StarClan."

"Never." Frostpaw heard her own mew, thick with hate, as though it belonged to another cat.

Splashtail groaned. Blood poured from his belly where she'd clawed him. It welled at his neck and stained his face, and Frostpaw felt suddenly stiff with shock. Had she really done that to him?

Helpless now, the false RiverClan leader seemed to see Tigerstar's patrol. He looked at them blearily, as though not understanding why they were here. "Why are you staring at me?"

Tigerstar's eyes glittered with rage. "You threatened *kits*!"

Crowfeather padded forward. "You murdered your Clanmates."

Splashtail gazed at them, his eyes rounding. "But I had to."

No cat spoke. They only stared, their eyes dark with contempt.

“I saved my Clan.” Splashtail’s blood was spreading across the grass. He tried to push himself up, his desperate gaze flashing toward the watching cats. “I only—” He collapsed, his paws buckling under him. With a groan, he slumped onto the ground. “I never—” Splashtail didn’t finish. His eyes glazed. His breath stuttered, then stopped, and he seemed to slide into sleep. It would be the deepest sleep he’d ever slept.

He's dead. Frostpaw was trembling. She could hear the river swishing behind her. Reeds shivered at the edge of her vision.

Lightleap padded shakily toward her. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Frostpaw blinked at her, suddenly aware of the sting of the scratches on her pelt. She felt blood, hot and wet at her throat, and a fierce, sharp pain that reached deep into her neck. The ground seemed to shift, the cold blue sky slid away, and she felt herself dropping like a stone into water as darkness swallowed her.

Chapter 13

Nightheart winced, prickles jabbing his paws as he tugged out the brambles choking the nursery entrance. “You can come out now,” he called to Mosspelt, who was blinking at him from the shadows inside.

A cold breeze was streaming over the RiverClan camp, and Nightheart tried to fluff out his fur, but too much of it was crusted with blood. His pelt stung; his muscles ached. But the battle was over. He glanced across the clearing at Sunbeam. She was comforting Havenpelt beside the reed wall, near the gap Splashtail had crashed through with Floatkit. There were wounds along Sunbeam’s flank, and concern tugged at his chest; he wanted to check on her, but Mosspelt was scrambling out of the nursery.

“Is Splashtail gone?” The tortoiseshell elder glanced warily around the ragged RiverClan camp.

“He dived into the water,” Nightheart told her. “With Floatkit.”

Havenpelt looked frozen, staring at the reed wall, her remaining kits wrapped tight with her tail.

“Harestar will bring her back.” Sunbeam soothed the frightened queen. “Splashtail can’t get far.”

“But he’s a good swimmer,” Havenpelt whimpered.

“He’s carrying a kit,” Sunbeam reasoned. “It’ll slow him down.”

Was that true? Nightheart felt a twinge of doubt. Harestar had taken a patrol after Splashtail, but the false RiverClan leader knew the reed beds better than they did. Even if they caught up to him, would they be able to get Floatkit safely away from the vicious tom?

The rest of the RiverClan warriors looked stunned, standing around the clearing, their pelts twitching, their tails stiff. They seemed afraid to even look at one another, as though they no longer knew whom to trust. The Clan patrol shifted uneasily around them. It felt as though every cat here were holding his or her breath, wondering what would happen next.

Sneezecloud crossed the camp and crouched beside Havenpelt. “It’s going to be okay,” he told his mate. “Floatkit’s tough. Harestar will find her and bring her home.”

“How could Splashtail do this?” Havenpelt stared at him with round, frightened eyes. “He’s our kit!”

Sneezecloud touched his muzzle to hers gently. “We can never truly know what is in another cat’s heart.”

Sunbeam turned away, and Nightheart caught her eye.

“Are you okay?” He padded over to her. “Did Fognose hurt you badly?” His pelt burned. He felt like a fool for having thought he could persuade the RiverClan she-cat to help him. Fognose had pretended to be interested, but now he realized she’d never considered turning on Splashtail. She was a *kit-stealer*, for StarClan’s sake! *But I was desperate.* He swallowed back a growl. He never wanted to be that desperate again.

“I’m fine.” Sunbeam blinked at him anxiously. “Just a few scratches.” Her gaze flitted across his pelt. “You’re a mess, though. You need a medicine cat.”

Nightheart looked at the battered RiverClan warriors. “I’m not the only one.”

“Puddleshine and Alderheart will be here soon,” Sunbeam told him.

The two medicine cats had been waiting on the shore until the camp had been secured, and Squirrelstar had sent Twigbranch to fetch them.

“I’ve been so worried about you.” Sunbeam’s eyes glistened. “Duskfur said you went to rescue Duskkit and Ridgekit and that you disappeared.”

Nightheart’s belly tightened. “The SkyClan kits!” He hadn’t thought about them since he’d been captured. “Did they get away?”

“Mothwing and Duskfur took them to the ThunderClan camp,” Sunbeam told him. She sniffed the long gash on his shoulder. “It looks like Splashtail really hurt you.” Her mew trembled. Seeing his wounds up close clearly frightened her. Her fear was contagious. Were his wounds *that* bad?

He pushed the thought away. “I’ll be okay,” he mewed firmly. He didn’t tell her that it was Gorseclaw who’d wounded him and that when he’d fought back, Breezeheart, Sneezecloud, and Brackenpelt had joined in. It was best she didn’t know; best maybe that no one

know how close the RiverClan warriors had come to carrying out Splashtail's orders to kill him.

He'd been lucky Owlnose had arrived and distracted them. The moment Owlnose had padded into camp, Splashtail had called his warriors off and turned his attention to interrogating the brown tabby tom. He'd demanded to know why Owlnose wasn't still in the ShadowClan camp, and Owlnose had warned him that a patrol was on the way. The brave tom had then turned to his Clanmates and yowled that the patrol was huge and would be here any moment, that they didn't need to listen to Splashtail because help was coming. Splashtail had raked Owlnose's muzzle to shut him up. He would have done worse if he hadn't been more interested in securing his hostages. He'd ordered Nightheart to be hidden in the nursery and retreated into his den to make sure the kits couldn't escape.

Sunbeam shifted beside him, distracting Nightheart from his thoughts. "I wish Puddleshine and Alderheart would hurry up," she mewed, glancing again at Nightheart's wounds.

Nightheart looked toward the entrance. He was more interested in whether Harestar had caught up to Splashtail.

Squirrelstar stood at the head of the clearing. The ThunderClan leader watched the RiverClan warriors through narrowed eyes. Sparkpelt was beside her with Violetshine and Emberfoot, their gazes hard, their pelts twitching angrily.

Gorseclaw glared at them. "Stop judging us," he snapped. "*You* would have done the same."

Sparkpelt's tail flicked. "I never would have followed a cat like Splashtail."

"He was our leader!" Brackenpelt growled. "What else could we do?"

Violetshine stared at him. "You could have stood up to him."

Minnowtail stared back. "He would have killed us! He killed Harelight just for *questioning* him."

"He was just one cat," Sparkpelt argued. "You outnumbered him."

Owlnose met her angry gaze, his eyes dark. "We thought he was going to fix everything." The tom's pelt was ragged and bloody. "It wasn't until later that we knew he was dangerous," he mewed. "By then it was too late."

“We were scared,” Minnowtail added. “We’d lost Mistystar and Reedwhisker and then found out we had no connection with StarClan. And then Tigerstar brought warriors into our camp.”

“We just wanted to feel safe,” Owlnose mewed. “We thought Splashtail would protect us.”

“He got Tigerstar’s warriors out of the camp,” Minnowtail reminded them.

“He was okay to start with.” Graysludge’s eyes glittered anxiously. “Then he started to make us train with our claws unsheathed.”

“Then he killed Harelight.” Minnowtail’s mew caught in her throat. “After that, he threatened to kill the kits, and we had to protect them.”

“We wanted to stop things from getting worse,” Graysludge mewed.

Nightheart looked around at the RiverClan cats, who were beaten and miserable. They’d been through a nightmare. And now they were going to have to earn the respect and trust of the other Clans as though they were nothing but rogues. He felt a jab of pity. “Perhaps they really had no choice,” he told Squirrelstar. The ThunderClan leader hadn’t spoken, but her gaze was the hardest of all.

She growled. “Warriors always have a choice.”

As she spoke, reeds rustled at the camp entrance. Fognose stumbled in, her pelt wet from the river and ragged where claws had ripped it. Mallownose followed her, scowling. He shoved Fognose forward and glared at her.

Havenpelt blinked anxiously. “Did Splashtail get away?”

“I don’t know.” Mallownose didn’t look at the queen. He kept his gaze on Fognose. “This fleabag stopped me from catching up to him.”

Breezeheart crossed the camp, her pelt bristling indignantly. “Leave her alone!” She stood in front of Fognose and snarled at Mallownose. “Fognose was protecting her leader.”

“Splashtail wasn’t a leader,” Mallownose growled. “He was a rogue.”

“You seemed happy enough following his orders,” Breezeheart hissed.

Mallownose's pelt ruffled. "I was trying to stop him from hurting the kits!"

Fognose curled her lip with disdain. "You *liked* having a leader who scared the other Clans."

"That's not true!" Mallownose lashed his tail.

"Really?" Fognose glared at him. Then her gaze swept around the other cats. "Admit it. You were all pleased when he told us no other Clan would bully us again!"

"Of course we were pleased!" Owlnose stepped forward. "We wanted RiverClan to be strong, just as any warrior wants their Clan to be strong. That doesn't mean we wanted a murderer in charge."

Mallownose nodded eagerly. "As soon as we knew he was losing his mind, we—"

"You *what*?" Breezeheart snarled.

Nightheart's belly tightened. The RiverClan cats glared at one another. He moved closer to Sunbeam. "If they can't agree after everything that's happened," he whispered, "how will they ever live together as a Clan?"

"I don't know." Sunbeam shifted beside him. "Without a leader, how can—"

Paw steps sounded outside the entrance. Sunbeam broke off. Had Puddleshine and Alderheart arrived? Nightheart pricked his ears hopefully and felt a small twinge of disappointment when Tigerstar padded into camp. Gullswoop and Whorlpelt followed the ShadowClan leader. Nightheart stiffened as he saw the body draped over their backs. *Splashtail.* They stopped and let it slide to the ground.

The false RiverClan leader landed with a soft thud. Around the clearing, the RiverClan cats stared at it, their eyes hollow with shock. Were they *relieved* he was dead? Or were they scared it might not be true? It might be another trick by their cruel leader.

Only Havenpelt moved. She hurried forward. "Where's Floatkit?"

Harestar padded into camp. Havenpelt's gaze lit up as she saw the bedraggled kit clinging to his back. She grabbed Floatkit's scruff between her teeth and swung her down from the warrior's shoulders. Dropping the kit between her forepaws, the queen began licking her furiously, a purr rolling in her throat.

Nightheart's spirits lifted for the first time. As he began to hurry forward, Heathertail padded through the reed entrance. He saw at once the fear darkening the WindClan warrior's eyes. *Something's wrong.* Nightheart slowed as Heathertail glanced back. Songleap and Brindlewing were following. Another body was slung across their backs. Nightheart's chest tightened as he recognized the drenched pale gray pelt. Blood dripped from it, staining the ground. "Frostpaw?" His mew caught in his throat. He froze. Was she dead?

"Frostpaw!" Sunbeam hurried forward as Songleap and Brindlewing eased Frostpaw to the ground. She crouched beside the bedraggled body, her ears twitching with fright.

Nightheart could barely breathe. *Frostpaw.* After everything she'd done to save RiverClan, did she have to pay with her life? Then the body moved. His pulse quickened. She was breathing! Frostpaw was still alive. He raced toward her, stumbling as Puddleshine skidded into camp and shooed him back. The ShadowClan medicine cat made straight for Frostpaw and nudged Sunbeam out of the way.

Alderheart hurried in after him, and Nightheart held his breath as the two medicine cats leaned over Frostpaw. She was unconscious, blood darkening the earth around her. Puddleshine listened to her breathing. Alderheart checked the long, deep wound on her neck. It looked exactly like the wound Splashtail had given her two moons ago. Nightheart stiffened. Had he tried to murder Frostpaw again? Rage surged in Nightheart's chest as he glared at the false RiverClan leader's body. This cat had caused misery even with his dying breath. Nightheart wished with a sudden impulse that he'd been the one to kill the vicious fox-heart.

Tigerstar shifted anxiously behind Puddleshine. "Is she going to die?"

His words turned Nightheart's blood cold.

Puddleshine didn't look up. "I don't know."

"I'll fetch cobweb." Alderheart headed for Podlight's den. "I hope he kept the herb store well stocked."

"She mustn't die." Owlnose padded closer. "We need to speak to StarClan."

Nightheart bristled. Was that the only reason he wanted her to live?

“We’ll do what we can.” Puddleshine didn’t take his eyes from Frostpaw.

“We’re never going to find a leader,” Mallownose fretted. “Perhaps we should just choose the best warrior and send them to the Moonpool to get StarClan’s blessing.”

“We thought Splashtail was the best warrior, and look what happened,” Minnowtail growled.

“How can we be a proper Clan without a medicine cat?” Mallownose sounded scared. “Who will treat our wounds?”

Nightheart could barely believe his ears. Was Frostpaw nothing more than a medicine cat to these warriors? Didn’t they realize what she’d been through to save them from Splashtail?

“We’ll have Mothwing,” Gorseclaw mewed.

“But she has no connection to StarClan.” Mallownose’s ears twitched. “Can we call ourselves a real Clan if we don’t have a connection to StarClan?”

“Nor a leader,” Minnowtail growled.

“Let’s not worry about that now,” Owlnose mewed. “Let’s just find our paws, fill the fresh-kill pile, and repair the camp.”

“I don’t want to stay in a Clan with no leader,” Mallownose mewed. “I’d rather live with another Clan.”

“Me too,” Minnowtail agreed.

“I’m staying here,” Owlnose growled. “This is my home.”

“RiverClan belongs here,” Sneezecloud chimed.

“My kits are going to grow up beside the river,” Havenpelt told them firmly.

Mallownose blinked. “Even without a medicine cat?”

“What do you mean, ‘without a medicine cat’?” Mothwing limped into camp, Duskfur supporting her. “You’ll have me.”

Nightheart felt a rush of relief. Mothwing saw Frostpaw as more than just a medicine cat. She knew how brave Frostpaw had been. Around the clearing, the RiverClan warriors turned toward the golden medicine cat.

Mothwing looked at Frostpaw, hardly more than a blood-stained scrap of fur, and Nightheart saw alarm spark in her eyes, but her mew remained firm as she went on. “You’ll have Frostpaw too. Puddleshine won’t let her die, nor will I. She’s done too much to help

her Clan. She's going to recover. I'm going to make sure of it. And, when she does, she'll share with StarClan and find the leader we should always have had."

Did she really believe that? Frostpaw was barely breathing, and Puddleshine's frown betrayed his worry. Nightheart blinked questioningly at Mothwing, but she swished her tail and looked around at her Clanmates. "Don't give up hope," she told them. "StarClan won't abandon you. Trust them."

Nightheart felt a flicker of surprise to hear Mothwing telling her Clanmates to trust in StarClan when she had no connection to them herself. But RiverClan seemed to brighten. Mallownose fluffed out his fur. Owlnose lifted his chin.

Only Fognose looked unconvinced. "Trust *StarClan*?" she growled bitterly. "After they let the strongest leader we could ever hope for die?" She looked at Splashtail, her eyes dark with grief.

Breezeheart squared her shoulders. "You killed him." She glared accusingly at her Clanmates. "When all he did was try to protect you."

Nightheart blinked at them in surprise. Were they still willing to defend the false RiverClan leader after everything he'd done?

Owlnose's hackles lifted. "Protect us?"

"He destroyed RiverClan!" Mallownose snarled.

"He made us *strong*!" Fognose snarled back. "It's you and the other frog-hearts who have destroyed RiverClan. If you'd supported him, *they* wouldn't be here." She shot an accusing look at Tigerstar, Squirrelstar, and Harestar.

The three leaders exchanged glances.

"They'll never leave us alone now!" Breezeheart lashed her tail.

Owlnose growled at her. "You supported Splashtail because he let you order us around! You were as power-crazy as he was!"

Mallownose flattened his ears. "You enjoyed making us train day and night."

Minnowtail flexed her claws. "You liked getting first pick from the fresh-kill pile."

"You purred when he gave me this name!" Graysludge growled. "My former mentor, no less!"

Nightheart stiffened. The RiverClan cats were advancing on Fognose and Breezeheart, unsheathing their claws. Fognose and Breezeheart began to back away as they seemed to realize they'd gone too far.

Tigerstar padded quickly in front of them. "There's been enough violence," he growled.

"We don't want warriors like them in RiverClan," Mallownose hissed.

"Of course you don't. Nor do I." Tigerstar turned toward Fognose and Breezeheart. "From now on, you are exiles. We don't want to see either of you around the lake ever again."

"You're not our leader!" Fognose glared at him. "You can't exile us!"

Tigerstar glared back. "Do you think your Clanmates will let you stay?"

Breezeheart watched the other RiverClan warriors nervously.

"You heard him." Owlnose bared his teeth. "Get lost!"

Mallownose snarled beside him. "You don't deserve to be RiverClan warriors!"

Fognose and Breezeheart backed toward the entrance.

"Get out!" Minnowtail rushed at them, and they turned and fled.

"Traitors!"

"Fox-hearts!"

As they disappeared through the reed tunnel, RiverClan jeered, their angry yowls ringing around the camp.

Alderheart was hurrying from the medicine den, a wad of cobweb dangling from his jaws along with a bundle of herbs. He dropped them next to Puddleshine, and together they carefully began to pack the sticky cobweb into the wide gash on Frostpaw's neck as Mothwing unbundled the herbs and started to chew the leaves into a poultice.

Nightheart felt suddenly weary. His injuries stung more fiercely, and he longed to lie down and rest.

"Nightheart?" Sunbeam's pelt brushed his, and he turned to find her gazing at him, her eyes dark. "Are you okay?"

"I want to go back to camp and have a long sleep," he told her. He glanced toward Frostpaw. What if he woke up to find she'd died?

His heart seemed to twist in his chest.

Sunbeam's gaze followed his. "She's in good paws," she promised. "Mothwing won't let her die." Her gaze flitted back to Nightheart. "You look exhausted," she told him gently. "Go home. Ask Jayfeather to check your wounds, then get some rest."

She sounded like she wasn't coming with him. "What about you?"

"There's something I need to do."

Alarm pricked in Nightheart's pelt. Sunbeam's eyes glistened with grief. "What?"

"Berryheart is dead."

His breath caught. "Did Splashtail kill her?"

"He let his warriors do that." Her mew was thick. "I tried to protect her, but I think I made it worse."

"No." Nightheart pressed his muzzle against her cheek. How could protecting any cat make it worse? "You did the right thing."

"Do you think?" She pulled away and looked at him hopefully.

"I'm sure." He glanced toward the camp entrance. The Clan patrol was beginning to leave. Tigerstar lingered beside Frostpaw, but Squirrelstar and Harestar were leading their warriors out of the RiverClan camp.

Sunbeam looked at them too. "Go with them," she mewed.

"What about you?" He glanced at the claw marks on her flank. "You need to see a medicine cat."

"I will," she mewed. "Afterward." She paused and seemed to swallow, as though steadying her mew. "First . . ." She paused again, her eyes shimmering. "First, I need to bury my mother."

"I'll come with you." He started forward. "I can help."

"Thank you." She blocked his way. "I know you want to be there for me, but I need to do this alone."

She turned and headed for the entrance, and Nightheart watched her go, feeling suddenly helpless. Frostpaw was injured. Sunbeam had lost Berryheart. And all he could do was wait.

Chapter 14

Sunbeam's claws were clogged with soil, her paws were sore, and her shoulders ached, but the grave was finally dug. She hadn't rested since the battle and was weary from the work and from her grief. But the day wasn't over yet.

Tigerstar had given Berryheart a small space, close to camp but away from the gentle sunlit slope near the lakeshore where they usually buried their fallen Clanmates. Hollowspring, Spireclaw, and Sparrowtail had helped with the digging. She'd wanted to do this alone, but they were grieving too, and like her they wanted to honor Berryheart with one final act of love and duty. She was grateful for their help once she realized how cold and hard the ground was, and they worked silently together, scooping out a hole deep enough to make sure Berryheart could rest unbothered by foxes. The earth had been snarled by roots, which had to be untangled and snapped. Yarrowleaf had joined them without saying a word, digging through the long afternoon, then supporting Berryheart's head as they'd lowered her body into the grave.

It was evening now, the sun casting long shadows through the chilly forest. They'd covered Berryheart with earth and headed back to camp. They'd return to the grave for the ceremony once night had fallen, then sit the long vigil for Berryheart, but now Sparrowtail and Hollowspring had something to ask Tigerstar.

Sunbeam hung back as her father and brother approached the ShadowClan leader. The camp was still ragged from the battle, with too many warriors injured to begin repairs. Flaxfoot and Hopwhisker alone had made a start, twining ivy around the entrance to the elders' den to fix the brambles torn away by Breezeheart and Mallownose. They wove in the last few tendrils as their Clanmates settled down to share the prey that Squirrelstar had sent.

"I thought you'd never eat prey caught by another Clan," Tawnypelt teased as Cloverfoot tore a mouthful from a ThunderClan rabbit.

Cloverfoot chewed and swallowed, then swiped her tongue around her lips before answering. "It was shared out of respect," she

mewed. “Besides, ThunderClan has eaten plenty of our prey in the past. It’s only right they share theirs from time to time.”

Tigerstar sat as still as stone, his gaze hard as Sparrowtail stopped in front of him. Hollowspring’s head was bowed, his tail down.

“Would there be a place for us in ShadowClan now?” Sparrowtail ventured.

Tigerstar stared at him, and Sunbeam sensed he was swallowing back a growl.

“I know we left, but Berryheart was my mate,” Sparrowtail pressed softly. “I had to be loyal to her.” He glanced at Hollowspring. “And a kit will always be loyal to its mother.”

“*Sunbeam* wasn’t,” Tigerstar mewed.

Sunbeam felt a jab of guilt. Was Tigerstar criticizing her? Or praising her? She’d refused to leave with her mother, but she’d left ShadowClan for ThunderClan.

Sparrowtail’s pelt twitched. “Loyalty can be complex,” he mewed. “Should we put our kin or our mate or our Clan first?”

Tigerstar’s gaze remained hard. “I suppose every warrior must make their own decision,” he growled. “But they need to realize that their decisions have consequences.”

Sparrowtail blinked at him. “So by choosing Berryheart, we gave up ShadowClan?”

“It looks that way.” Tigerstar’s tail flicked angrily.

Sunbeam padded forward. Tigerstar glanced at her warily. Would he listen to her? “Sparrowtail and Hollowspring were loyal warriors,” she mewed. “They followed a cat they loved. That wasn’t dishonorable.” *I chose Nightheart.* “It shouldn’t be punished.”

Tigerstar narrowed his eyes. “Do you *want* your brother and father to be part of ShadowClan again?” he asked. “Wouldn’t it be easier if they asked Squirrelstar if they could be ThunderClan warriors? You’d never have to face them in battle.”

“They don’t want to be ThunderClan warriors,” she told him. “They want to be part of ShadowClan.”

“What we want is not always what we get,” Tigerstar grunted.

Sunbeam searched his gaze. Why was he making this so hard? “Do you think you can’t trust them?”

“I don’t want warriors who come and go as they please,” Tigerstar told her.

“They only left once—”

Sparrowtail nudged her gently away. “This is my problem,” he told her. “I can fix it.”

Tigerstar’s tail grew still. “How?”

“Berryheart is dead,” Sparrowtail mewed. “The only cat who could persuade me to walk away from my birth Clan is gone.” His voice grew thick, and he paused. Tigerstar watched the brown tabby tom closely until, at last, he went on. “I could see she was growing more and more unreasonable,” he explained. “I was scared for her. I couldn’t let her go alone. She needed someone, and I thought perhaps, if we were with her, we could guide her back.”

“Did you agree with her?” Tigerstar asked, his gaze steady. “Are you against warriors switching Clans?”

“No.”

“Do you think I should be replaced as leader?” Tigerstar’s gaze hardened.

Sparrowtail returned it steadily. “No,” he mewed. “You’re a smart and strong leader, and I think the changes to the code will be good for the Clans. I think they will bring more peace and harmony.”

Hollowspring looked eagerly at Tigerstar. “We’ll spend the rest of our lives trying to prove our loyalty,” he mewed. “You can give us trials if you like, as though we were switching Clans, to prove we can be good ShadowClan warriors.”

Sunbeam felt a pang of pity for her brother. He was born here, and now he was offering to be tested to see if he was worthy of his place.

Tigerstar shifted his paws and, for the first time, seemed to soften. “I won’t make you pass trials,” he mewed. “But you will have to earn the trust of your Clanmates again. Berryheart led a patrol against them and you joined it. It will take time for them to forgive you, and they may never entirely forget.”

“I know.” Sparrowtail looked at his paws. “I’m sorry. We would never have done it if Havenpelt’s kits hadn’t been in danger.”

Hollowspring blinked at Tigerstar. “We’ll catch more prey and join more patrols than any other warriors. We’ll do any chore that needs

doing.”

Tigerstar nodded. Then his gaze flashed toward Sunbeam. “And you?” he asked. “Would you like to rejoin ShadowClan?”

“No.” She was surprised he’d asked. Wasn’t it obvious how happy she was in ThunderClan? “The Clan that raised me and trained me and protected me for so many moons will always be in my heart. But my loyalty is to ThunderClan now . . . and to Nightheart.” She glanced at her father, trying to guess what he was thinking. He’d never been as angry as Berryheart that she’d left ShadowClan to be with Nightheart, but he *had* been hurt. He looked at her now, and she was surprised to see that his eyes were filled with pride and affection. She felt a rush of gratitude, and yet grief pierced her heart so sharply it took her breath away. Why couldn’t Berryheart have felt the same way? Why did she have to be so sure she was right when it hurt so many cats? *When it hurt* me*?* She swallowed back the lump rising in her throat. *Why wasn’t she just happy that I was happy?*

Sunbeam pushed the thought away. *What we want is not always what we get.*

As they gathered around the grave, fluffing out their pelts, ready for the long night ahead, Sparrowtail dipped his head.

Sunbeam shifted her paws. Was he preparing to speak? What could he say about the cat he’d loved enough to follow into such darkness?

“Berryheart had so much courage.” His eyes glistened as he looked at her grave. “As apprentices we trained together, and because of her, every training session was challenging. She always questioned everything and was never satisfied with an answer until she could prove for herself it was true. I fell in love with her determination to be the best warrior she could be and, after we had kits, to be the best mother she could be, and to always seek out some sort of order in the world around her. Where I was uncertain, she was sure. For better or worse, she followed her instincts, and I admired that. She was hard on cats she disagreed with, but she was generous and kind to the cats she loved.”

Sunbeam felt a twinge of resentment. *She wasn't kind to me once I'd chosen a path different from the one she'd imagined for me.*

Sparrowtail's gaze darkened. "She may have made wrong decisions in her life, but I will always believe that her determination to follow what she thought was right and true made her a warrior who, in different circumstances, could have been truly great."

Sunbeam glanced at him. *Different circumstances?* Did he mean that Berryheart would have been loyal and honorable if she'd never met Splashtail? Or if the warrior code had never changed? Was that true? Hadn't she left ShadowClan once before to follow the rogue Darktail, believing he would be a better leader than Rowanstar? Darktail had almost drowned her, and he'd almost destroyed ShadowClan, and yet Berryheart had chosen to follow *another* cruel tom after Tigerstar threw her out of ShadowClan. Sunbeam couldn't help wondering if Berryheart might always have sought out the darkest path.

"Berryheart was my kit." Snowbird began to speak. "In the days before Darktail, I believed she would live and die only for ShadowClan. She was courageous and driven. Her heart burned with love for her Clan. And she could have lived and died like that. But Darktail came. I wish he hadn't. I wish she'd never known what it was like to fear for her life, to see her Clan nearly destroyed. I wish she'd never learned to be so terrified of change that, to protect her Clan, she was prepared to turn on the very cats she should have trusted." Her eyes filled with sadness as she gazed at Berryheart's grave. "I wish that a cat who could be as good and kind as any warrior I've known hadn't left me with so many sad memories. I will try to remember only what was good in her. I hope that in death she will finally find peace."

How? In Sunbeam's heart, she knew it was impossible that StarClan would accept Berryheart. *She'll have to roam the Dark Forest.* Her grief darkened until she was almost breathless with horror, imagining the future her mother would face alone in the shadows among cats who had betrayed their Clanmates, who had harmed their Clans, who had even *murdered*. How could any cat find peace there?

Then she hesitated. Perhaps finding peace was what the Dark Forest was *for*. Sunbeam snatched at the glimmer of hope. Perhaps it was a place where warriors could finally come to terms with the darkness that had shadowed their lives.

Yarrowleaf's mew interrupted Sunbeam's thoughts. "Let's remember that Berryheart is one of the cats who helped bring Tigerstar back to ShadowClan. If he hadn't returned, ShadowClan would not exist today. In bringing him back, Berryheart kept our Clan and our traditions alive." She looked around the gathered cats. "So let's remember that the determination and single-mindedness that led Berryheart to betray her Clan also helped save it."

Whorlpelt nodded. Sparrowtail dipped his head. Around the grave, the others murmured in agreement.

Sunbeam realized that Yarrowleaf was looking at her. So was her father. They were waiting for her to speak. She shifted nervously, wondering what she could say. Out of the thoughts and emotions she'd had about her mother these past moons, what could she share with these cats? They'd known her longer and perhaps better than a kit could know its mother. They'd met her as an equal, as a warrior. Could they understand the hurt she'd felt when Berryheart had rejected the choices she'd made?

"My mother and I didn't always agree," she began tentatively. "But I loved her. When I was young, she protected me so fiercely I wasn't scared of anything. As long as Berryheart was alive, I knew I would never come to any harm. I was grateful she was my mother. I admired her strength. I wanted to be a warrior just like her. I wanted to be as certain in my beliefs. I wanted to be as loyal to my Clan. But it seemed that StarClan had laid out different paths for us, paths that would take us away from each other and from the love I'd always taken for granted."

Her heart suddenly tightened with pain as though a claw had opened a fresh wound in it. "I thought she had changed so much that she was no longer the Berryheart I'd known as a kit. At times it felt as though she'd chosen to live like a fox instead of a cat, following only her instinct, never questioning whether what she felt was true, unaware that she could be wrong." She glanced at her mother's friends, her paws pricking with sudden anger. Couldn't they have

warned her? Then she felt a pang of guilt. It was unfair to accuse them. Berryheart had made her own choices. “Berryheart truly believed that ShadowClan would be stronger without Tigerstar. She believed she was fighting *for* her Clan and not *against* it. She was wrong, and she harmed a lot of cats she should have protected.” *Including me.* Her throat tightened.

“Remembering Berryheart will always be hard,” Sunbeam mewed. “She led an enemy into this camp and fought beside him. Such a betrayal can never be forgotten. But I hope one day, when ShadowClan has recovered and grown stronger, it will be forgiven. Until then, I will hold in my heart the memory of Berryheart saving me. She died protecting me. The fierceness I trusted as a kit was a promise she kept in the end. For all her faults, my mother loved me, and I will always be grateful for that.”

Sunbeam suddenly wished Nightheart were here. She wanted to feel the comfort of his pelt brushing hers, the warmth of it reaching through her fur. Around her, Whorlpelt, Yarrowleaf, Spireclaw, and Snowbird stared sadly at Berryheart’s grave. Sparrowtail had lifted his gaze to the moon and seemed to be lost in his own thoughts while Hollowspring’s shoulders slumped. A part of Sunbeam wished she didn’t have to leave her father and brothers again, that she could stay and they could comfort one another. But another part was relieved that she was going home to ThunderClan. Perhaps she’d be able to leave the bittersweet memories of her mother behind in the pine forest. Without this grave to remind her daily that Berryheart was dead—that she was roaming the Dark Forest now—Sunbeam could almost pretend her mother was still alive. *It will be as though she’s still here, in the forest, with her Clanmates. And with me.*

Chapter 15

Frostpaw woke in pain. Her neck throbbed with an intensity that seemed to thump through her whole body with every heartbeat. She was in the roots of a thornbush and the pain a sharp stone striking her over and over. She tried to hide again in sleep, but a single clear, bright thought held her in the waking world. *I'm alive.* She was aware, beyond the pain, of a warm nest around her, and she could smell the pungent scent of Mothwing's den.

Then she remembered Splashtail lying at her paws, his eyes dull, his pelt soaked with blood. *I killed him.* Guilt twisted tendrils around her belly. *Have I become like him? He was a friend.* Once. Long ago. Her heart remembered loving him. It remembered the future she'd planned as his mate and the mother of his kits, and it ached with loss.

Was RiverClan safe? Her belly tightened with fear. Wrecked by Splashtail, her Clan would face the other Clans as vulnerable as a newborn kit. She wanted to struggle from her nest and protect them. She'd been trying to protect them for moons and yet still they weren't safe. *I'm coming.* She needed to be on her paws, but the nest held on to her. Her body was too tired, too heavy to move. *They must take care of themselves now.* The thought calmed her. It felt like something StarClan might say. It loosened her guilt, her loss, and her fear. As she let go of RiverClan, peace swirled like mist around her, and she let herself fall into it.

Deep in the mist, there was no pain. It comforted her, and she relished the softness of it against her face and along her flanks. Then she tensed. She wasn't alone. A tail swirled through the mist beside her. Had Splashtail followed her? Had he come for revenge? She wheeled around, her breath catching as she saw a familiar pale brown pelt. "Curlfeather!" She was confused. *Am I dead?* Was this the Dark Forest?

As she strained to see her mother, the mist thinned. There was blood on Curlfeather's pelt. Her ears were torn. A wound, open and red, stretched from her mouth to her eye. Frostpaw flinched as memories rushed at her: the snarl of the dogs, the smell of blood,

her mother's agonized screech. She froze with the same helpless terror that had scorched her pelt as she'd watched from the branch of a tree.

Curlfeather blinked at her lovingly, and her wounds faded. The swirling mist seemed to heal them, and her mother's fur was suddenly as smooth and soft as it used to be. Relief swamped Frostpaw. She padded forward and touched her muzzle to Curlfeather's cheek. She'd thought she'd never smell that warm scent again, like freshly woven reeds and rainwater and moss. She breathed it for a moment before she remembered. *She used me.*

Curlfeather's betrayal rushed back, like water closing over her. She pulled away. Her pelt bristled. "Why did you betray me?" She watched her mother, hoping for a reason to forgive her. But Curlfeather only blinked calmly back at her.

"I was trying to help you," she mewed simply. "As the daughter of the Clan leader and a medicine cat, you'd have been important. You would have had power."

"I didn't want power!" Frostpaw snapped.

"It would have made you safe."

"I *was* safe! I had RiverClan!" Darkness swept over her, and she felt herself swirling down beneath the mist. Silken reeds enfolded her. She was back in her nest in Mothwing's den. *Marigold*. Herb scents pressed around her. *Oakleaf. Comfrey.* The tang was so sharp she tried to flinch away.

"You're safe." Mothwing's mew sounded nearby. A paw touched her flank. Breath warmed her ears.

Then the mist slid around her once more, thicker now, too dense for her to see even a tail-length ahead. She heard paws thrum the earth, heard a snarl, smelled sour, fishy breath. Panic struck her like a blow as Splashtail burst from the fog, his face bloody, his teeth bared, hatred glittering in his eyes.

"You ruined everything!" His snarl hit her like a gust of air and she flinched, screwing up her eyes, bracing herself for the attack. Nothing happened, but still she backed away, whimpering as she felt a soft body behind her. Whirling around, she saw Curlfeather.

"He's not here." Her mother's mew was as soft as a greenleaf wind.

Frostpaw blinked at her. “He tried to kill me.”

“I know.” Was that regret in Curlfeather’s eyes? “But he’s gone now. He can’t hurt you anymore.” She turned away. “Come with me.” Beckoning with a flick of her tail for Frostpaw to follow, she headed into the mist.

Frostpaw padded after her, still trembling, to where the fog opened to reveal the RiverClan camp. Frostpaw’s heart lifted as she saw the clearing among the leaves. Owlnose and Shimmerpelt were dropping their catch on a fresh-kill pile already filled with plump, glistening fish. Mallownose was eating a trout. Sneezecloud was washing while the other warriors lounged at the edge of the clearing. But, despite the full fresh-kill pile and the warm sunshine chasing away the leaf-bare chill, the RiverClan cats looked worried.

“A Clan’s not a Clan without a leader,” Shimmerpelt mewed.

“Perhaps it’s a *better* Clan,” Mallownose ventured.

“Nonsense,” Shimmerpelt sniffed. “Our leader carries the blessing of StarClan. They share the blessing with us. It makes us special.”

Mallownose sniffed. “That hasn’t exactly worked in the past.”

“It’s not just the blessing of StarClan that makes us special,” Owlnose mewed.

“Then what does?” Mallownose asked.

“Loyalty, honor, courage,” Owlnose told him.

“Any cat can have those,” Shimmerpelt argued. “It’s our connection with StarClan that makes us true warriors. Right now we have no leader, no medicine cat—RiverClan is like a cat without a tail.”

“Frostpaw will recover.” Mothwing was picking bones from a salmon outside the medicine den.

Mallownose looked at her. “Can we be sure of that?”

Frostpaw leaned closer as Mothwing hesitated, her chest tightening. She blinked at Curlfeather. “Am I going to die?”

Curlfeather eyed the RiverClan warriors uneasily, her pelt twitching along her spine.

Why isn’t she answering me? Frostpaw’s heart began to pound. “*Am* I?”

“I hope not.” Curlfeather watched the RiverClan cats.

Owlnose looked thoughtful. “RiverClan started with no medicine cat,” he mewed. “StarClan must have sent us the first one. All we need now is faith in ourselves and in StarClan. RiverClan will find a leader and grow strong again. We need only to wait.”

Frostpaw felt soothed by his words. But would his Clanmates believe him? Before she could find out, the mist closed over them. Darkness engulfed her, and once more she smelled the tart scent of herbs and felt the warmth of her nest. The pain in her neck sharpened. Her body ached, heavy as stone. Was this what it felt like to die? She heard Duskfur’s mew.

“Is her fever going down?”

“Not yet,” Mothwing replied. She sounded worried.

“Do you need more herbs?”

“All the herbs in the world won’t bring her back if she doesn’t want to come.”

But I do! Frostpaw tried to struggle into consciousness, but pain seared her neck and lit a fire along her spine. She fell back, relieved as the soothing mist swallowed her again. She swirled upward into dreams. She saw Floatkit being dragged through the water by Splashtail, then Lightleap lying stunned on the ground as the false RiverClan leader raised his paw. His face was twisted by hate, and Frostpaw felt a jolt of panic as the riverbank dissolved and she found herself once more in the RiverClan camp. This time Harelight was lying at Splashtail’s paws, his throat red, blood glistening on the earth around him.

“Wake up!” Curlfeather was calling to her, and Frostpaw struggled to shake free of the dream.

She opened her eyes to find fog swirling around her again. She scanned the mist for her mother, relieved when she made out Curlfeather’s shape a few tail-lengths ahead. As she hurried toward it, she broke from the fog. She found herself beside Curlfeather in the pine forest. It was nighttime. The tang of needles and the rich smell of freshly dug earth washed over her. Sunbeam was sitting beside a grave in the moonlight with Sparrowtail, Spireclaw, and Hollowspring and a few more ShadowClan cats.

“Who died?” Frostpaw asked her mother, her pelt ruffling anxiously.

“Berryheart,” Curlfeather mewed.

“How?”

“Owlnose killed her.”

Owlnose? Frostpaw felt a jolt of alarm. “In self-defense?” she asked hopefully.

“Splashtail ordered him to do it,” Curlfeather told her.

“And he obeyed?” Frostpaw felt a chill around her heart. What had happened to her Clanmates? Had they all gone crazy? Suddenly she was thankful to be away from the lake and the Clans and the madness that seemed to have consumed everyone. If only she could hide in the mist forever, free of pain, no longer part of the madness.

Her heart sank as the vision of Sunbeam was replaced by a new one. It was daytime and raining, and she was watching Nightheart race through the oak forest. The air was filled with the musty odor of decaying leaves. Nightheart was chasing down a squirrel. His pelt was glossy, slicked by rain, his ears pricked, his tail streaming out behind him. He looked well and happy, as though he’d forgotten everything that had happened, as though he didn’t realize RiverClan was still in trouble.

“Frostpaw.” Mothwing’s mew jangled at the edge of her thoughts. “Swallow this. It’ll help with the pain.”

She felt seeds on her tongue and coughed as they touched her throat. The spasm sent pain slicing through her neck, and she fell back into the mist.

“Curlfeather?” she mewed. Her mother had turned away from the vision of Nightheart. “Did you bring me here on purpose?” Was Curlfeather responsible for these dreams? “Is there something you want me to know?”

“This is your world, not mine,” Curlfeather told her. “I’m only here because you wanted me.”

Frostpaw could suddenly taste the warm, milky smell of a nursery. A den shimmered into view around her, and she recognized SkyClan scent. Tucked in a nest beside the nursery wall, Blossomheart was comforting her kits.

“It’s okay.” The queen gave quick, comforting licks to each kit’s ears. “You were very brave, but I won’t let anyone take you again.”

“I hope not.” The kit touched his nose to his mother’s.

Frostpaw’s throat tightened. She turned away. Splashtail was dead, but cats were still suffering. Anger sparked in her chest. Her mother had started this. She glared at Curlfeather as the den disappeared and mist closed around them once more. “Why did you want to become leader?”

“I told you.” Curlfeather blinked at her. “I wanted you to be safe.”

“You didn’t need to be leader to make me safe!”

“I wanted RiverClan to be safe.”

“So you murdered Reedwhisker?” Frostpaw’s anger hardened.

“*Splashtail* murdered him,” Curlfeather told her.

“It was *your* idea!”

“If Reedwhisker had become leader,” Curlfeather mewed, “nothing would have changed.”

“Why did anything *have* to change?” Frostpaw was bewildered. “RiverClan was fine! It was great! I loved it. You’ve ruined it, and I don’t know if it will ever recover. And why?” She didn’t give her mother a chance to reply. She knew the answer. Rage was boiling in her belly. “You were greedy. You were selfish. You wanted power.”

“That’s not true.” Curlfeather looked hurt. “For far too long, Mistystar let the other Clans tell us what to do and how to think. She listened to their opinions, let their needs guide ours. Reedwhisker would have done the same. But with me as leader, RiverClan could have been strong. We could have led the Clans instead of following them.”

“Led them *where*?”

Curlfeather didn’t seem to care. “It would have worked if Splashtail hadn’t killed me. This mess is his fault, not mine.”

“Really?” Frostpaw couldn’t believe her mother could be so blind. “Killing Reedwhisker and tricking me into giving my Clanmates false messages from StarClan was okay?”

“It was the only way to make sure that RiverClan had a leader who could make it strong!”

“Why did it have to be strong?” Frostpaw wailed. Her mother wasn’t listening! “It was fine as it was!”

Curlfeather looked at her.

“You lied to me!” Frostpaw knew this wasn’t her mother’s worst crime. But right now it felt like the worst. “You’re my mother. I’m supposed to be able to trust you. But you told me I was a medicine cat. You told me I could share with StarClan and I believed you.”

“But I was right, wasn’t I?” Curlfeather looked puzzled. “You *are* a medicine cat! You *can* share with StarClan.”

“I can *now*!” Frostpaw mewed. “But now it’s too late. The things I told our Clanmates—things you tricked me into telling them—were lies.” She stared at her mother, her heart pounding, desperate to hear Curlfeather say something that would make what she’d done seem reasonable. But Curlfeather didn’t try to explain. Frostpaw bristled. “You fooled me into thinking I was special,” she yowled. “You used me to feed lies to my Clan.”

Curlfeather’s eyes flashed indignantly. “I did it for you!”

Sharp pain stabbed Frostpaw’s neck. It jerked her awake. She was back in her nest in the medicine den. Sunlight sliced through the entrance, dazzling her until Mothwing leaned close, blocking it out.

“It’s okay,” Mothwing murmured. “I’m changing the poultice. It’ll feel better in a moment.”

Frostpaw felt her eyes roll, felt the dampness of her pelt, felt the heat of the nest. Too weak to struggle, she stiffened as Mothwing carefully peeled the poultice from her neck. The sting of it made her whimper, and she heard Shimmerpelt’s mew.

“Here’s the moss.”

It touched her lips, spongy and wet, and she felt cool water slide into her mouth and down her throat.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, rain was pounding the camp. She could see it streaming over the medicine-den entrance. She could hear the river swishing past. She closed her eyes and it was nighttime, then morning, then night again, as though each time she blinked, another day passed. And all the time she felt her fever raging and the pain in her neck throb.

“Frostpaw.” Her mother’s voice called her from the darkness of sleep, and she followed it back into the mist. What else did Curlfeather have to say? More excuses? Impatience pricked Frostpaw’s belly, but at the same time she wanted to follow, she

wanted to breathe her mother's scent and hear her voice and feel her close.

"If it hadn't been for Splashtail," Curlfeather mewed, "RiverClan would be strong now. I'd have been a leader who made the other Clans respect us."

More excuses. "Do you think StarClan would have given you their blessing?"

Curlfeather looked surprised. "I didn't need their blessing!"

Frostpaw stared at her. "How could you have been a leader without nine lives?"

"You don't need nine lives to run a Clan," Curlfeather snorted. "All you need is to be smarter than the other cats."

"But StarClan holds the Clans together," Frostpaw argued. "It guides our paws. It makes us warriors."

"Don't be ridiculous," Curlfeather swished her tail. "The warrior code is what makes us warriors."

"Where in the warrior code does it say you can kill your deputy and trick a Clanmate into becoming a medicine cat when they have no connection with StarClan?" Frostpaw was bristling again.

"You *do* have a connection with StarClan!"

Frostpaw stared at her. "Don't you understand what you've done?"

"I tried to make my Clan strong!"

"You turned me into a liar!" Frostpaw wailed. "You turned Splashtail into a murderer and he tried to murder *me*! Aren't you even sorry that I nearly died because of you?"

"I'm not responsible for Splashtail!"

Frostpaw's claws itched. "Do you feel responsible for *anything* you've done?"

"I'm only responsible for wanting RiverClan to be stronger."

"You destroyed it!"

Curlfeather paused for a moment. She looked thoughtful.

Frostpaw's pulse quickened. Hope snatched at her heart. Did Curlfeather finally understand?

"I'm sorry things ended up the way they did," her mother mewed at last. "I'm sorry I trusted Splashtail." She leaned closer. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

Disappointment dropped like a stone in Frostpaw's belly. "But aren't you sorry for murdering your deputy?"

"I told you! *Splashtail* murdered—" Curlfeather paused as a new thought seemed to strike her. "Whoever killed him, Reedwhisker *had* to go." She met Frostpaw's gaze with an earnestness that chilled Frostpaw to the bone. "He needed to make way for a better RiverClan."

The mist darkened. Blackness pressed at the edge of Frostpaw's vision as Curlfeather began to fade. Fear flashed in her mother's eyes. Bloodstains showed on her pelt. Her ears were torn once more. *She's going back to the Dark Forest.*

"No!" Frostpaw fought to keep sight of her mother. The long gash running from Curlfeather's mouth to her eye had opened up and was glistening darkly. "Not yet!" Frostpaw's mew became a wail as she watched her mother's frightened gaze glitter for a moment before it dissolved with the rest of her and disappeared into shadow.

Frostpaw stared at the empty darkness. Curlfeather had gone away from here forever, back to the Dark Forest, without ever having acknowledged the harm she'd done. Frostpaw felt heavy with grief. Had Curlfeather always had this darkness inside her? *Was I just too stupid to know?* The two cats she'd loved most—Curlfeather and Splashtail—had been wicked. They'd betrayed her, murdered Clanmates, hurt everyone they'd ever known. And now she was left with only the suffocating weight of knowing that she was going to have to fix everything they had destroyed.

Chapter 16

Nightheart padded into camp. A fat pigeon dangled from his jaws.

The rain had stopped and the moon was lifting above the trees. His pelt was still drenched as he led Flipclaw, Myrtlebloom, and Eaglewing across the clearing. They were carrying prey too. Nightheart's apprentice, Wafflepaw, walked alongside him, his eyes alight with excitement from their morning hunt. With everything that had been happening in the Clans recently, Nightheart had occasionally felt like he hadn't given the gray-and-brown tom the attention he'd deserved. Now that Splashtail was no longer a threat, Nightheart had resolved to be a better mentor.

Leaf-bare had set in hard—on clear mornings frost covered the dens—but there was still enough prey for experienced hunters to find. The Clan needed to eat while it could. In another moon it would be harder to fill the fresh-kill pile. With this in mind, Nightheart had urged his patrol to flush out every piece of prey they spotted. They'd been eager to try. Eaglewing had even risked climbing the tall chestnut tree beside the deserted Twoleg nest to break into a squirrel's nest she'd glimpsed from the forest floor.

Now, Sunbeam was sitting with Sparkpelt and Finchlight below the Highledge as they shared a rabbit. She looked up as Nightheart stopped beside the fresh-kill pile and blinked happily at him, but he couldn't help noticing that she wasn't eating.

He dropped his pigeon. "Go and ask Jayfeather to check your paw," he told Eaglewing as she laid her squirrel beside it. The she-cat had spiked her paw on a chestnut husk as she'd landed.

"It's just a scratch," Eaglewing told him. "It'll be okay once I've washed it."

"Even scratches get infected," Nightheart pressed. "And the forest was muddy today. It'll need a proper clean. Let Jayfeather have a look."

Eaglewing eyed the medicine den nervously.

"Alderheart will be there too," Nightheart nudged. "You could ask him." Alderheart would be less likely to grumble that trees were for squirrels, not for ThunderClan warriors who had any sense.

“Okay.” Eaglewing padded toward the medicine den.

“Great hunt, Nightheart,” Myrtlebloom mewed before she headed away with Flipclaw.

Wafflepaw swished his tail and blinked eagerly at Nightheart. “Can we go on patrol again soon?”

“Sure.” Nightheart nodded, pleased.

The little tom purred, and stood up a little straighter. “Great!” He turned away. “This was so much fun!”

Nightheart felt a glow of happiness as he watched Wafflepaw turn around and run off to find the other apprentices. It had only been a quarter moon since Splashtail had died, but life in ThunderClan felt normal again. His wounds had mostly healed. The deepest ones across his shoulders and down his hind leg still itched where the scabs were drying. But they were clean, and Alderheart said they’d be gone before the next Gathering.

He nosed through the fresh-kill pile, looking for a sparrow. Sunbeam liked sparrows. She was eating a little more than when she’d returned from burying her mother, but Berryheart’s betrayal and death had been hard on her, and her appetite was still poor. He found a small, plump sparrow at the bottom of the pile and pulled it out.

As he crossed the clearing, careful not to burst the small bird’s flesh with his teeth, Poppyfrost looked up from the mouse she was eating. She nodded toward the fresh-kill pile. “Impressive catch considering the rain.”

“Eaglewing raided a squirrel’s nest,” he mewed, trying not to drop the sparrow, almost sneezing as feathers tickled his nose.

Lionblaze was washing his face beside the warriors’ den. “A patrol is only as good as its leader,” he called.

“You get more and more like Fire—” Poppyfrost broke off as Lionblaze shot her a warning look. ThunderClan knew Nightheart didn’t like to be compared to his famous ancestor.

But Nightheart whisked his tail. He wasn’t as sensitive about it these days. “Thanks,” he mewed to Poppyfrost.

The dappled she-cat blinked in surprise and Lionblaze’s eyes widened. They were both clearly startled by Nightheart’s breezy response.

Nightheart dropped the sparrow in front of Sunbeam.

“Thank you,” she purred as he settled beside her.

Sparkpelt tore a hind leg from the rabbit and pushed it toward him. “Eat this,” she mewed. “Let Sunbeam have the sparrow to herself.”

“I offered to get her something,” Finchlight chimed, “but she said she wasn’t hungry.”

“She’ll enjoy the sparrow because Nightheart brought it,” Sparkpelt purred, pushing the rabbit leg closer.

Nightheart took it gratefully. “Thanks.”

Since Berryheart’s death, Sparkpelt and Finchlight had taken good care of Sunbeam—comforting her, fetching food, giving her space when she needed it. Seeing their kindness, Nightheart could hardly believe that his mother and sister had once felt to him more like enemies than kin. He was pleased that Sunbeam seemed at peace in ThunderClan, despite losing her mother, and he knew that Sparkpelt and Finchlight had done a lot to make her feel comfortable here.

Even now, Sparkpelt was watching Sunbeam fondly. “Make sure you eat it all.”

“I will.” Sunbeam leaned lightly against Nightheart and nuzzled his cheek with her nose. “Thanks, Nightheart.”

Nightheart purred and took a bite from the rabbit leg.

“Where have you been?” Lionblaze’s sharp mew made him look up. The golden warrior was glaring at Gorseclaw beside the camp entrance.

The RiverClan warrior shifted self-consciously beside Twigbranch. Since Splashtail had died, Gorseclaw had been staying in the ThunderClan camp, along with Lizardtail. “I was exploring,” he mewed meekly.

“You’re a *RiverClan* cat,” Lionblaze snapped. “This isn’t your territory. You shouldn’t be exploring.”

“She was with me,” Twigbranch mewed indignantly.

Lionblaze growled at his Clanmate. “*You* should know better than to encourage a cat from another Clan to roam around our territory!”

On the other side of the clearing, Lizardtail got to his paws.

Nightheart frowned. Why was Lionblaze being so defensive? Gorseclaw wasn't a threat. He'd come here to escape the chaos in RiverClan.

Twigbranch lifted her chin. "Gorseclaw is a guest in ThunderClan, not an enemy."

Squirrelstar looked down from the Highledge as Nightsky dipped her head to Lionblaze.

"I'm sorry if I broke any rules," the RiverClan warrior mewed apologetically. "I'm thinking about joining ThunderClan, so I thought I should get to know the territory. Twigbranch just wanted to help."

"Twigbranch doesn't get to decide who can join ThunderClan," Lionblaze snapped.

Twigbranch looked surprised. "But I thought warriors could switch Clans now," she objected. "The rules changed."

Squirrelstar bounded down the rock tumble and stopped beside Lionblaze. She looked at Gorseclaw. "I'm glad you think ThunderClan is worth joining, but wouldn't it be wiser to wait and see what happens in RiverClan before you make such a big decision?"

Outside the warriors' den, Finleap got to his paws. "It sounds like you don't *want* him to join," he mewed, padding closer.

Squirrelstar's tail twitched uneasily.

Nightheart leaned closer. Was the ThunderClan leader going to agree with Lionblaze?

"I just think now might not be the time to switch Clans," she mewed.

"Leaf-bare has got moons to go," Lionblaze warned. "Prey is about to get scarce. We don't need extra mouths to feed." He glanced sharply at Lizardtail, who was hanging back a few paw steps away.

"Don't look at me," Lizardtail grunted. "I'm not the one who's been trekking around ThunderClan territory."

Twigbranch's tail was swishing. "We're good hunters," she mewed. "We can feed extra mouths."

"Especially if we've got extra paws," Finleap chipped in.

Poppyfrost looked up from washing, her brow furrowed. "The Clan is already crowded," she complained. "There's no space

between nests in the warriors' den, and some mornings I can't cross the clearing without tripping over someone's tail."

Twigbranch looked at her in surprise. "We could extend the warriors' den," she mewed. "We've done it before. As for tripping over tails, perhaps your eyes are failing."

Poppyfrost's fur ruffled. "There's nothing wrong with my eyesight!"

Lionblaze's ears twitched. "I'm just saying that taking in new warriors wouldn't be easy right now. We've taken in enough."

Nightheart felt Sunbeam stiffen beside him. He ran his tail over hers and got to his paws. "Cats from other Clans bring more than extra paws for hunting," he mewed. "They bring new strengths and skills."

"Of course they do," Sparkpelt agreed loudly.

"Any cat who wants to join ThunderClan," Nightheart went on, "should be given a chance to prove themselves."

"Exactly!" Twigbranch called.

Poppyfrost's eyes widened. "*Any* cat?" She looked expectantly at Squirrelstar. Her Clanmates did the same.

Squirrelstar looked thoughtful. "This is clearly something we need to talk about," she mewed. "But now is not a good time for cats to be choosing Clans. RiverClan has yet to find its paws." She looked at Gorseclaw. "When it does, you may decide to go home. So let's not make any rash decisions."

Gorseclaw blinked at her. "What if RiverClan never finds its paws?"

Lizardtail padded closer. "It's been so long since Mistystar died, and we're no closer to finding a leader."

"Without Frostpaw, I don't see how we can ever find one," Gorseclaw agreed.

Without Frostpaw? Nightheart's paws pricked uneasily. The RiverClan warrior was talking as though Frostpaw was dead. But she'd recover soon, wouldn't she?

Squirrelstar whisked her tail. "It's been a long day." She changed the subject. "We should be eating and resting. Leaf-bare is going to get harder. Let's focus on hunting and getting the camp fit for cold weather."

Nightheart frowned. Squirrelstar hadn't defended warriors switching Clans.

"Nightheart." His leader's mew took him by surprise. She was beckoning him with her tail. She glanced at Bayshine. "I need to speak to you both."

"What does she want?" Sunbeam glanced at him uneasily. Had the conversation touched a nerve?

"She probably wants to assign tomorrow's patrols," he told her.

"Isn't Cinderheart in charge of that while Ivypool's away?"

Squirrelstar's tail was twitching impatiently.

"I'd better go," he told Sunbeam and headed toward the ThunderClan leader.

Bayshine was already waiting beside her.

"I want you two to go to the RiverClan camp," Squirrelstar mewed as he reached them.

"Now?" Bayshine blinked.

"Tomorrow morning."

Nightheart tensed. "Has something happened?"

"No," she mewed. "Appleshine came with a message while you were hunting. Harestar wants a cross-Clan patrol to help rebuild the RiverClan camp."

The island camp had looked ragged even before the final battle. Splashtail had done nothing to fix the dens and camp wall damaged by last moon's storm.

"I thought RiverClan didn't want other Clans interfering," Nightheart mewed.

"Mothwing made the request," Squirrelstar told him. "With so many warriors leaving, RiverClan needs extra paws." She swished her tail. "There'll be a patrol from WindClan and one from SkyClan too. They'll meet you beside the island at dawn."

Nightheart was glad to go. He'd asked a few days ago if he could visit Frostpaw, but Squirrelstar had told him he should leave RiverClan in peace. Perhaps she'd felt bad she'd refused him and that was why she'd chosen him now. *Who cares?* He fluffed out his fur. *At last I can see how Frostpaw's doing.*

“Hi.” Nightheart greeted them with a nod, and they lifted their tails, clearly pleased to see him.

Oatclaw and Appleshine were on the hillside, bounding down through the heather. They caught up to the patrol as Nightheart led them into the marsh and began to follow the grassy trail through the reeds.

“Leafstar says RiverClan is no nearer to finding a leader,” Sunnypelt mewed.

“How can they, with no connection to StarClan?” Appleshine asked.

“Frostpaw will be better soon,” Nightheart insisted. “She can advise them.”

“I heard she hasn’t woken up yet,” Oatclaw cautioned.

“But she will.” Nightheart wasn’t ready to believe anything else.

“Splashtail really hurt her,” Oatclaw mewed darkly.

“Why is RiverClan waiting?” Beepaw was trotting beside her mentor, Sunnypelt. “Why don’t they just pick the strongest warrior to be leader?”

“Look what happened last time they tried that,” Bayshine mewed. “Their strongest warrior nearly destroyed the Clan.”

Beepaw looked thoughtful. “Couldn’t StarClan send a sign to another cat?”

Nightheart glanced at her. Did she really think Frostpaw was easy to replace? “Medicine cats are special.”

“But this is an emergency,” Beepaw argued.

“RiverClan needs to do something soon,” Bayshine mewed. “I’m not sure how long Tigerstar will put up with a leaderless Clan on his border.”

Sunnypelt’s ears twitched nervously. “Do you think he’ll invade again?”

“He didn’t invade last time,” Nightheart grunted, thinking of Sunbeam. She’d always defended Tigerstar’s actions.

“Take over, then,” Sunnypelt corrected herself. “Do you think he’ll *take over* again?”

“I think he’ll be very wary about interfering a second time,” Bayshine mewed. “The first time made RiverClan choose Splashtail as their leader.”

Beepaw looked at him. “There can’t be another warrior like Splashtail.”

“Let’s hope not,” Oatclaw mewed grimly.

“Nightheart!” Sneezecloud was bounding toward them.

Nightheart slowed. “Hi, Sneezecloud.” He was struck by how different this visit to RiverClan was. This time he was here by choice. “You’re expecting us, right?”

“Yes.” Sneezecloud eyed Nightheart uneasily, and Nightheart felt a flicker of satisfaction. *You* should *be uneasy.* Not long ago, Sneezecloud and Fognose had marched Nightheart, beaten and bloody, along this very path. Now the RiverClan tom dipped his head. “I’m sorry about last time,” he mumbled. “I had no choice. Havenpelt and the kits . . .”

As his mew trailed away, Nightheart’s satisfaction evaporated, and instead he felt a jab of pity for the RiverClan tom. *Would I have done any different if Sunbeam and our kits were being held hostage?* “I understand,” he mewed. “It must have been hard.”

Sneezecloud looked relieved. He hesitated as though he might say more. But he didn’t. What could he say besides sorry? Instead he turned toward the camp. “We’ve made progress on rebuilding the walls,” he mewed, “but the dens are still a mess.” He headed along the trail, and Nightheart fell in beside him, the others at his heels. “We’ve collected reeds and ivy,” Sneezecloud went on. “We just need help weaving them in and some strong paws to hold up the roofs while we work.”

But Nightheart’s thoughts weren’t on the work that needed doing in the RiverClan camp. “How’s Frostpaw?” he asked. Had she really not regained consciousness?

Sneezecloud kept his gaze on the path. “Mothwing’s with her.”

Nightheart tensed. “Is she getting better?”

“We don’t know yet,” Sneezecloud mewed.

“She still hasn’t woken up?” Nightheart looked at him.

“Not yet.” Sneezecloud met Nightheart’s gaze. “But she has to, right? We can’t choose a leader without her.” He sounded scared.

Nightheart’s pelt ruffled uneasily. “StarClan won’t let her die,” he mewed, hoping it was true.

“Of course they won’t.” But Sneezecloud sounded far from certain. He broke into a run. “Come on,” he called back. “The others are expecting us.”

The RiverClan cats were already busy working when the patrol reached the camp. Mallownose and Nightsky were weaving together the reeds in the camp wall, fixing the holes left by the storm and a moon of neglect. Shimmerpelt was untangling a pile of ivy and laying it out, ready to be used. Owlnose and Minnowtail were reinforcing the nursery entrance, smoothing the reeds shredded by the brambles, while Podlight worked alone shoring up the base of the warriors’ den with earth.

Bayshine looked around. “Where should we start?”

“Can two of you fix the roof of the elders’ den?” Sneezecloud looked toward the small reed den at the end of the camp. Mosspelt was reaching up, trying to knot ivy into a hole gaping at the top.

Bayshine hurried to help, Oatclaw and Appleshine on his tail.

Nightheart’s paws pricked with worry. “Can I see Frostpaw first?”

“You can try.” Sneezecloud nodded toward the medicine den. “But I doubt Mothwing will let you in.”

“I just want to know how she is.” Nightheart was already crossing the clearing, his heart thumping as he stopped at the medicine den entrance. “Mothwing?” he called quietly.

The RiverClan medicine cat poked her head out, her eyes lighting up as she saw him. “Nightheart.” She slid out. “I’m glad you came.”

Hope flashed in Nightheart’s chest. Did she have good news? “Is Frostpaw better?”

His heart sank as Mothwing shook her head.

“She’s still sleeping,” the RiverClan medicine cat told him.

“But you’ve given her herbs,” Nightheart pressed. “Do you need me to gather more? I could ask Jayfeather. I’m sure—”

Mothwing cut him off. “I’ve done everything I can,” she mewed softly. “All that’s left is to wait.”

“But she will wake up, right?” Surely if Frostpaw had survived this long, she must be getting better?

Mothwing seemed to sense his fear. “She’s strong,” she told him. “She can make it if she tries.”

“Tries?” She made it sound like Frostpaw had a choice. “Why wouldn’t she?”

Mothwing blinked at him steadily. “She’s been through a lot.”

He gazed back at her. “But she’s not done yet. RiverClan still needs fixing.”

Mothwing glanced at the devastated camp. “Maybe that’s what’s keeping her away,” she mewed darkly. “Fixing RiverClan is going to be a big responsibility. She may not be sure she can do it.”

Nightheart peered past her, hoping for a glimpse of his friend, but all he could see was a deep nest at the far end of the den. “Does the medicine den need repairing?” It looked sound, but he wanted an excuse to stay.

“No.” Mothwing blinked at him sympathetically. “Sneezecloud can tell you what needs doing.”

“Sure.” Nightheart turned to scan the camp.

Bayshine was working on the apprentices’ den with Sunnypelt and Beepaw. It was ragged, with big holes in the side, and the roof had entirely caved in. Nightheart hurried to help. If he kept busy, it would stop him worrying about Frostpaw.

Sunnypelt was hauling a pawful of half-rotten reeds away from the den as he reached them. “No wonder Graypaw and Mistpaw came to live with us,” she mewed.

“Gray*paw*?” Nightheart blinked at her. “Have they changed their names back?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Sunnypelt pulled out another bunch of ragged reeds. “They were terrible names, and they were given by a fox-hearted murderer.”

Beepaw wrinkled her nose. The nests inside clearly hadn’t been replaced in a while. “This den stinks.”

“Pull the bedding out,” Sunnypelt told her. “We can make fresh nests when we’re done.”

“Why do *we* have to clean up their mess?” Beepaw complained. “After all the trouble they’ve caused, you’d think they’d be helping *us*.”

“It wasn’t their fault,” Sunnypelt told her.

But Beepaw was still annoyed. “I’m cleaning out their bedding and they aren’t even *living* here,” she huffed. “I bet when we go

home, I'll have to clean out the bedding there too."

"Graypaw and Mistpaw take care of their own nests," Sunnypelt told her sharply.

"Don't be petty," Nightheart added. "The Clans are strongest when they're helping one another." He looked at Beepaw sternly. "Don't you think?"

Beepaw didn't reply but hauled a half-collapsed nest from the den.

"Every Clan has made mistakes," Nightheart pressed. "We have to forgive each other."

Bayshine, who'd been working quietly beside him, paused as sunshine suddenly streamed through the clouds. He glanced up. "Look," he mewed. "StarClan must agree. They've sent a sign."

"If they really agreed," Beepaw sniffed, "they'd help me clear out this bedding."

"I hope it's enough." Mallownose laid a shrew at Nightheart's paws. "Land prey was hard to find."

Gorseclaw was tearing into a fat trout. "I don't know how the other Clans survive leaf-bare without a river to fish in," he mewed.

"There's probably more prey in the forest than there is along the riverbank," Bayshine mewed cheerily as he sat down beside the vole Sneezecloud had given him.

The RiverClan cats had clearly made an effort to find fresh-kill the visiting patrol would enjoy after their long day repairing the camp. Now, as the sun slid toward the distant pines, they were settling down for their evening meal.

Nightheart's belly growled with hunger. The shrew Mallownose had given him was small, but it smelled good. He took a bite.

Beepaw shared a sparrow with Sunnypelt. Oatclaw had asked if he could taste the salmon Owlnose was eating. Appleshine watched him, barely suppressing her horror as her Clanmate tore a strip from its glistening body.

Bayshine swallowed a mouthful of vole. He looked around at the RiverClan cats. "What do you think will happen now?"

Owlnose looked up. "I guess we just carry on until Frostpaw recovers," he mewed.

Nightheart glanced anxiously toward the medicine den. *If she recovers.* His tail twitched.

Owlnose went on. “When she wakes up, she can ask StarClan about a leader.”

“I’m still not sure we *need* a leader,” Mallownose mewed.

Nightheart felt a prickle of surprise. A Clan without a leader? How could that possibly work?

But Sneezecloud was nodding. “The last thing we need is another leader like Splashtail,” he mewed.

“Which one of us is as bad as Splashtail?” Nightsky grunted.

Nightheart didn’t look at the white tom. His scars still itched from their fight.

“A Clan needs a leader,” Owlnose insisted.

“Why?” Mallownose asked. “We’re smart and loyal. We know what needs doing. We don’t need someone to give us orders.”

“We’re still warriors whether we have a leader or not,” Sneezecloud chimed in.

Shimmerpelt added, “Just because Clans have had leaders in the past doesn’t mean we need leaders in the future.”

Owlnose’s pelt ruffled. “Without a leader, we’d end up arguing.”

Nightsky flicked her tail. “Someone needs to make decisions,” she mewed. “What if Tigerstar decides to invade again? Without one voice to speak for us, it would be easy to divide us and take over.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Sneezecloud reasoned. “Many voices speaking together would be more powerful than one voice overruling the others.”

“Yes,” Mallownose agreed. “A single voice might mean we react more quickly, but is that a *good* thing? Surely it’s better to think things over and discuss them.”

Nightheart couldn’t believe they were so coolly considering carrying on without a leader. “A leader always thinks things over,” he mewed. “Squirrelstar would never do anything without thinking about it first. She talks things over with the Clan before she makes a decision about anything important.”

“I just wish we could go back to normal,” Nightsky muttered. “This doesn’t feel like a proper Clan anymore. I’m thinking of moving to WindClan.”

Nightheart was surprised to see some of the RiverClan cats nodding in agreement. He shifted uneasily. Graypaw and Mistpaw were already in SkyClan. Gorseclaw was hoping to join ThunderClan—perhaps Lizardtail too. He gazed sadly at the medicine den. When she woke up, Frostpaw would be devastated if her Clanmates had left.

If she woke up.

His belly tightened and he pushed the thought away.

When she wakes up.

Chapter 17

The Gathering would begin soon. Sunbeam looked across the sea of moonlit pelts, past the twitching ears and flicking tails, to where Mothwing was taking her place among the other medicine cats at the bottom of the Great Oak. She narrowed her eyes. If Mothwing was here, who was looking after Frostpaw?

It was more than a half-moon since Frostpaw had been injured, and rumors were rife about the sick RiverClan medicine cat. Sunbeam could hear the warriors gossiping even now.

“She must be dead,” Bellaleaf whispered to Sunnypelt as they nosed their way past Sunbeam. “Otherwise Mothwing wouldn’t have left her.”

“What will RiverClan do without a medicine cat to choose a new leader?” Sunnypelt fretted.

Sunbeam felt like pointing out that Shadowsight wasn’t at the Gathering and that there was a good chance he was sitting with Frostpaw so that Mothwing could come. She knew from Alderheart that the ShadowClan medicine cat had been making frequent trips to the RiverClan camp to relieve Mothwing and give her a chance to eat and wash and sleep.

And yet the thought that Frostpaw *might* have died worried her. She shifted closer to Nightheart. “Mothwing’s here,” she whispered in his ear.

“I know,” he whispered back. “I guess Shadowsight is taking care of Frostpaw.”

“That’s what I thought.” She felt comforted.

They were sitting with Lightleap and Blazefire, swapping news before the Gathering began. Spireclaw was with them too, and Fringewhisker, his mate.

“Tigerstar said that whatever happens now,” Lightleap mewed, “he’s not getting his whiskers tangled up in RiverClan’s business again.”

“But he’s not happy having a leaderless Clan on the border,” Blazefire added. “He says it’s like having a hole in the camp wall.”

“Do you think he’ll press the other Clans to act?” Nightheart asked.

Sunbeam glanced at him. “I hope not.” Wasn’t it interference from the other Clans that had made RiverClan so quick to support Splashtail? *The Clans have driven us to this. If they’d left us alone, none of this would have happened.* She remembered Podlight fighting until the very end, yowling at Hawkwing. She gazed across the clearing. The gray-and-white tom sat calmly beside Minnowtail, but would it take much to provoke him and his Clanmates again? “I hope RiverClan can sort itself out.”

“If there’s any RiverClan left,” Spireclaw grunted. “Hasn’t Nightsky gone to WindClan now? How many more are going to leave?”

“It’s just temporary,” Nightheart mewed.

“Are you sure?” Sunbeam looked at him. “Gorseclaw’s already talking about joining ThunderClan, and Graypaw and Mistpaw are hoping Leafstar will give them real warrior names soon.”

Lightleap nodded. “Who’d want to stay in a deserted Clan?”

“No one’s asking to join ShadowClan,” Blazefire told them.

“Why would they?” Spireclaw’s gaze flitted uneasily toward Podlight and his Clanmates. “They blame us for interfering, and they must know it’ll be moons before we forgive them for invading our camp. Streamkit is still having nightmares.”

Sunbeam turned toward the Great Oak as the murmuring of the gathered cats quieted. Harestar sat beside Leafstar on the lowest branch. Tigerstar pushed his way through the crowd. Squirrelstar hurried around the edge. As Tigerstar leaped up into the tree, the ThunderClan leader clawed her way up the trunk and took her place beside him.

Spireclaw nodded to Sunbeam. “See you later.” He began to weave his way back to his Clanmates.

Sunbeam headed after Nightheart to where Lionblaze, Poppyfrost, and the others were sitting. As they reached them and sat down, she noticed that Mallownose and Owlnose had settled among the roots below the leaders, a short distance from the medicine cats and deputies.

Harestar peered at them. “Would one of you like to join us as RiverClan’s representative?” he called.

“No, thanks,” Mallownose called back up. “We’ll speak for RiverClan together.”

Squirrelstar glanced at them, her eyes narrowing. Then she stepped forward on the branch. “Leaf-bare has begun gently, but the hard moons are ahead of us. Prey is tricky to find, but our hunters are skilled, and no one has gone hungry yet.” She looked across the gathered cats to where Gorseclaw and Lizardtail sat among the ThunderClan warriors.

Sunbeam glanced at them too, wondering for the first time why they hadn’t gone to sit with their Clanmates. Did they really see themselves as ThunderClan cats now?

Squirrelstar acknowledged the two RiverClan warriors with a blink. “Gorseclaw and Lizardtail are beginning to get used to forest hunting. Let’s hope their skills continue to improve.”

Was she gently warning Gorseclaw and Lizardtail that they would only be tolerated as long as they could help feed the Clan? The two RiverClan cats stared back at her calmly. If she meant it as a hint, it didn’t seem to trouble them.

Squirrelstar stepped back, and Harestar took her place.

“The WindClan camp is almost fully repaired after the storm, but we are now looking to reinforce the dens in case of heavy snowfall this leaf-bare.” He shot a look at Squirrelstar. “WindClan warriors are also skillful enough to keep our fresh-kill pile stocked even as prey dwindles. We are missing Whistlepaw and hope she and the others will be back soon from their quest.” He looked at the medicine cats below. “Have any of you had word from StarClan about their progress? Will they be home soon?”

Jayfeather flicked his tail. “If we’d heard anything, we’d have told Kestrelflight,” he mewed.

Harestar moved his gaze to the gathered warriors. “Let’s hope StarClan is watching over them.” Dipping his head to Leafstar, he stepped back and let her address the Gathering.

Sunbeam’s attention wandered. She was more interested in Mothwing. Did she look sad? Worried? Was there a clue in her

expression about Frostpaw's condition? She nudged Nightheart. "Can you tell if Mothwing's upset?" she asked him under her breath.

He leaned closer. "She'd have told us if anything was wrong." He looked anxious. "Wouldn't she?"

Sunbeam hoped he was right. She wanted to agree with him, but anxiety still pricked in her belly. "Why is it taking Frostpaw so long to recover?" Sunbeam asked.

"I guess her wounds were bad," he whispered.

"But your wounds are healed," Sunbeam pointed out.

"Mothwing hinted that Frostpaw had to *want* to get better."

Sunbeam blinked at him. "Why wouldn't she?"

Nightheart hesitated.

He doesn't know either. She was puzzled. Wouldn't any cat recover if they *could*?

Nightheart suddenly seemed to find a reason that made sense to him. "Perhaps she knows what's waiting for her when she does," he suggested. He nodded toward Graypaw and Mistpaw, sitting among the SkyClan cats in the middle of the clearing. "I can't believe they left when she was so sick." His gaze flitted to Lizardtail and Gorseclaw, then Nightsky. "Perhaps she knows her Clan has fallen apart."

"But she could stop them from leaving if she woke up," Sunbeam pointed out.

"She might think it's already too late," Nightheart mewed.

Sunbeam's heart sank. Could that be true?

Tigerstar had stepped to the front of the branch. He looked down at Mallownose and Owlnose. "What's happening in RiverClan?" he asked.

Mallownose and Owlnose exchanged glances as the gathered cats leaned forward, pricking their ears to hear the RiverClan warriors' answer.

"Nothing's *happening*," Mallownose told Tigerstar, an edge in her mew. "There's nothing we can do until we can share with StarClan. And we can't do that until Frostpaw recovers."

"When will that be?" Tigerstar asked.

"We don't know," Mallownose told him.

Tigerstar looked frustrated. “Have you had any signs from StarClan about your future?”

“No.” Owlnose stared at him coolly. “Clearly StarClan isn’t as troubled about our future as you are.”

Frecklewish took a step forward. “They’ve given us a sign,” she mewed.

Tigerstar’s gaze flashed eagerly toward the SkyClan medicine cat. Sunbeam’s breath caught. She felt Nightheart stiffen beside her as murmurs rippled around the Clans.

“Both Kestrelflight and I were given the same message,” Frecklewish went on.

Please let it be good news. Sunbeam pressed closer to Nightheart.

“StarClan told us,” Frecklewish went on, “‘if the frost cannot stay, the river will dry.’”

Sunbeam felt a cold chill run along her spine. *If the frost cannot stay?* So Frostpaw might die?

The gathered cats glanced at one another, their fur prickling nervously.

“The river will dry.”

“It can only mean one thing.”

“RiverClan will disappear.”

Among the roots of the Great Oak, Owlnose and Mallownose had grown stiff.

Sunbeam tried to imagine the lake without RiverClan. Her belly clenched. There were supposed to be five Clans. Whatever happened, the Clans were meant to survive. She felt anxious. If one Clan could disappear, the others could disappear too.

Harestar stepped forward. He looked down at the RiverClan cats. “Can’t you find another cat who can connect to StarClan?”

Owlnose flexed his claws. “Do you think we haven’t thought of that?”

Mallownose growled. “True medicine cats are rare. We can’t just invent them when we need them.”

Harestar looked ruffled. “Perhaps another Clan can give you one of their medicine cats,” he suggested. “Temporarily, of course.” He went on quickly. “With Whistlepaw gone, WindClan can’t spare

Kestrelflight, but the other Clans have spare medicine cats. Hasn't Shadowsight already been helping out?" He looked hopefully at Puddleshine.

Tigerstar stepped forward quickly on the branch. "ShadowClan doesn't have *spare* medicine cats," he mewed gruffly. "We need both Puddleshine *and* Shadowsight."

"Why?" Harestar looked at him. "There's no sickness in your Clan."

Tigerstar glared at the WindClan leader. "I'm fine with Shadowsight helping out. But no ShadowClan cat is going to stay in the RiverClan camp ever again." Every cat at the Gathering knew that he wasn't going to give RiverClan another chance to blame ShadowClan for their troubles.

Alderheart looked thoughtful. "ThunderClan could do without me."

Frecklewish nodded. "I don't see why Fidgetflake shouldn't spend a few days in RiverClan, if it would help."

Jayfeather snorted. "It seems like a lot of fuss to help a Clan that can't keep hold of its warriors," he grunted. "The whole Clan might have disappeared by the next Gathering."

"Not if we help," Alderheart argued.

Mothwing was glaring at the ThunderClan medicine cat. "We don't *need* another Clan's medicine cat," she snapped. "Frostpaw is going to recover, and when she does, *she* will be our connection to StarClan."

As eager mews rippled around the Clans, Sunbeam glanced at Nightheart. "She sounds so certain."

"Let's hope she's right." Nightheart's eyes glittered with hope, and Sunbeam felt a twinge of foreboding. She knew that he'd find a way to feel responsible if Frostpaw didn't pull through.

Squirrelstar looked around the gathered cats, clearly waiting for the murmuring to die down. "There has been a lot of talk about cats leaving RiverClan," she mewed at last. "I think it's time we spoke about it." Sunbeam pricked her ears. Was she going to give RiverClan the same advice she'd given Gorseclaw and Lizardtail? Was she going to tell them to wait? Squirrelstar seemed to be weighing her words carefully. "For the time being, we will not be allowing cats from other Clans to join ThunderClan."

Sunbeam's heart lurched. Around the clearing, the warriors were looking at one another in surprise.

"What about the warrior code?" Violetshine called from among the SkyClan cats.

"We've agreed that switching Clans is okay," Appleshine called from WindClan.

Sunbeam could see Fringewhisker's pelt rippling uneasily. She'd left SkyClan to be with Spireclaw. Fernstripe looked anxious too. She'd left WindClan to join Shellfur. Sunbeam knew how they felt. The new code had allowed them to be with their mates. Their new Clans had welcomed them. Was that about to change?

Squirrelstar hadn't finished. "Leaf-bare is always a difficult time in any Clan," she mewed. "Prey is scarce and the weather is hard. ThunderClan is already a large Clan, which is a great strength but could easily become a weakness if there's not enough prey to go around."

"Weren't you boasting about the skill of your hunters a few moments ago?" Violetshine called.

"Prey is not the only thing that worries me." Squirrelstar's gaze swept around the watching warriors. "I worry about RiverClan's reasons for switching Clans. I was happy to welcome warriors who *wanted* to join ThunderClan. But I'm less certain of warriors who want to join because they have nowhere else to go—"

"Wouldn't that make them *more* loyal?" Violetshine argued. "If you give them a home when they have none, won't they be grateful?"

"If all they want is stability"—Squirrelstar had to raise her voice above the crowd's mews, which were growing louder and louder—"can we really depend on their loyalty?"

"You can't trust warriors who switch Clans for better prey!" Yarrowleaf yowled from among the ShadowClan cats.

Sunbeam felt cold. It was the sort of argument Berryheart would have made.

"Nonsense." Harestar lifted his muzzle. "Whether you fill a warrior's belly when they're hungry or give them security when they have none, you will have their loyalty for life!" He raised his voice over the yowls below. "WindClan will be happy to welcome any

RiverClan warriors who need shelter. More warriors mean more prey, and more prey means a stronger Clan."

Sunbeam suddenly realized that Owlnose was bristling. The RiverClan warrior's eyes blazed with anger. "RiverClan warriors are not kits for you to take in as though they can't look after themselves!" he snarled. "Any Clan would be lucky to have us. But we don't need taking in!"

"What about the message from StarClan?" Yarrowleaf called. "If Frostpaw dies, there won't *be* a RiverClan!"

"A warning is not the same as a prediction!" Owlnose yowled back. "We will heed StarClan's words, but RiverClan is not going to disappear!"

Mothwing lashed her tail. "Frostpaw will recover," she called. "Once she does, we can find a leader and restore the Clan. RiverClan doesn't need you digging a grave for a living cat. We don't need medicine cats from other Clans. We don't need anyone offering to take our warriors in. We make our own decisions, and no one else will do it for us."

The gathered cats bristled, their ears twitching, as uncertainty seemed to swoop in the air like bats above them. But Leafstar's gaze was calm.

"We must listen to RiverClan," the SkyClan leader mewed. "They know best what they need." Her gaze slid toward her Clanmates at the back of the clearing. It seemed to be searching for one cat in particular. "But perhaps Tree could try to reach Frostpaw?" She made the suggestion tentatively, and Tree narrowed his eyes as the crowd seemed to hold its breath.

Sunbeam felt a rush of hope. The yellow SkyClan tom had contacted spirits before. If Frostpaw was frightened of what she might face if she woke up, perhaps Tree could reassure her. She blinked eagerly at Tree. But the SkyClan cat was looking doubtful.

"I'll try," he mewed.

"We can ask for no more than that." Leafstar swished her tail as the gathered cats began whispering hopefully. "Perhaps it's time we all went home. We have covered a lot of ground tonight. It might be best to take time to think about what's already been said before we say more."

The cats below began to head at once toward the long grass at edge of the clearing, moving like shoals of fish, their pelts glossy in the moonlight, as though they were eager to return home and talk about what had happened.

“Come on.” Nightheart nudged Sunbeam.

“Where?” She hurried after him as he slipped through the gaps in the dwindling crowd.

“I want to ask Mothwing about Frostpaw,” he mewed over his shoulder.

Mothwing was shaking out her pelt as they reached her. She blinked at Nightheart. “Is everything okay?”

“I wanted to know how Frostpaw is doing,” he mewed.

Sunbeam’s heart sank as she saw Mothwing’s gaze darken.

“She’s getting weaker,” Mothwing mewed.

Sunbeam blinked at her. “But you told the Gathering she’d recover.”

“We have to believe that,” Mothwing mewed. “I can only hope that her beloved StarClan is taking care of her, because I’ve done all I can do.”

“You said she was strong.” Nightheart’s eyes were round with shock.

“She is,” Mothwing mewed. “I just hope she’s strong *enough*.”

Sunbeam pressed against Nightheart, her heart aching for him. The RiverClan medicine cat had suffered so much. It seemed unfair that her suffering had to go on like this. Then she realized that Mothwing was looking at her.

“What?” Sunbeam met her gaze nervously.

“I’m glad I have a chance to speak to you,” Mothwing mewed.

Sunbeam stiffened. Had something happened? “Why?”

“I treated Berryheart when she first came to RiverClan,” Mothwing told her.

At the mention of her mother’s name, Sunbeam’s heart began to pound. What else had Berryheart done?

“She was very sick at the time,” Mothwing explained. “I thought she might die. Her wound was badly infected, and she was out of her mind with fever.” She paused. “She asked for you.” Her gaze was as gentle as a mother’s. “Over and over.”

Sunbeam's throat tightened. "Really?"

"Yes." Mothwing dipped her head. "I just wanted you to know that whatever else Berryheart did, she loved you very much."

Sunbeam pressed back grief, but still her eyes burned with it. "Sometimes, when she was still alive," she mewed shakily, "I used to wonder if she'd stopped loving me." Her mew grew thick. "I thought I'd done something wrong. I thought, if I could have just been better or more like the warrior she wanted me to be, then she wouldn't have changed like she did. She wouldn't have become . . ." It was too hard to say. She felt Nightheart pressing against her and was grateful for his warmth.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Mothwing told her firmly.

Sunbeam steadied her breath. "Thank you for telling me." She gazed back gratefully at Mothwing. "It helps, knowing she thought of me."

She wondered if that was true. Everything that had happened with Berryheart still seemed like a bad dream. *But it wasn't my fault.* Sunbeam lifted her chin and tried to blink away her sadness. *I can be sure of that now, can't I?*

Chapter 18

So much mist. Frostpaw pushed through it. Would it never end? Occasionally Mothwing's voice would drift in and out, and sharp pain would stab her neck. From time to time she felt the sensation of water running between her lips and over her tongue. But it felt like moons since she'd glimpsed the deep colors and sharp edges of the waking world. Mist was all she saw, and however much she strained to see beyond it, there seemed to be only more.

If only she weren't so tired, she could run, try to outpace it, break into bright sunshine and clean, fresh air. But the heaviness she'd felt for so long had begun to give way to a weakness that seemed to grow with every step until she wondered how her paws held her up. Perhaps she should give in, lie down and let the mist swallow her. All she had to do was close her eyes and let go and she would be free at last from the pain and the tiredness and the sense that she was utterly alone.

And yet curiosity drew her on. What if there was something ahead, something she was meant to find if she could just keep going, just keep putting one paw in front of the other? She let her curiosity draw her forward. A few more steps. Her pulse quickened. A few more steps. Was the mist thinner here? Could she see light ahead? Excitement flickered in her chest as she broke from the mist and saw a Twoleg den. *Yes!*

The she stopped. *A Twoleg den?* What was this place? Why was she here? The sky was deep orange, the huge stone den illuminated by the setting sun. She looked for Twolegs, but it seemed deserted, all closed up but for a tall, square-cut entrance that opened into darkness.

Something was creeping along the bottom of the den. Frostpaw narrowed her eyes against the glow of the evening sky. She could make out a tom. He was skinny, his long fur unkempt. It hung from his bony frame. His eyes were hollow with hunger, his gaze fixed on the shadowy opening. Was he planning to go inside?

No! Frostpaw wanted to yowl, but fear kept her quiet. This tom wasn't a kittypet. He was too scrawny. He seemed to hesitate,

pausing at the opening and glancing warily over his shoulder, his pelt rippling along his spine, before turning to peer once more into the yawning darkness inside the den.

“Don’t go in!” Frostpaw wailed, but her mew was no more than a dry croak. “It’s dangerous!”

The tom didn’t hear. Bracing himself, he slunk into the shadows.

No! Frostpaw felt panic spark in her chest but didn’t have the strength to run forward and stop him. As she watched, horror rising in her throat, a slab of wood slammed across the opening, sealing the tom inside. She tried to wail, but the mist closed around her and the den disappeared.

She stumbled forward. She had to find the den again. She had to save the tom. But she could see only mist. Disoriented, she whirled around. *Where am I?* A familiar scent touched her nose. *The river.* She pricked her ears, listening for the rush of water, aware suddenly of mud beneath her paws. Rain battered her pelt. She flinched as a fierce wind whipped the mist clear and she found herself standing on a riverbank. It was nighttime. A storm raged. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and a river churned past, frothing over its banks, tugging at bushes, dragging at trees. She backed away, fear surging beneath her pelt as a cat screeched. She jerked her muzzle toward the desperate cry. There was a tom in the river. He was being swept downstream, spun around by the thick, muddy water.

Horror gripped her as she saw more cats struggling in the river, their paws striking out, their eyes wild with terror. A she-cat fought for the bank, her face streaming, her eyes half-closed as she managed to grip a trailing branch and haul herself from the water. A kit dangled from her jaws. The queen dropped it and crouched over it, her eyes wide with shock as another cat swept past, caught in the grip of the thundering river.

On the far bank, cats crouched at the edge, trying desperately to reach their drowning friends. Others pressed against one another, their faces contorted with fear as the mud beneath their paws crumbled and fell away.

“Emberstar!” a tom screeched upstream. His fur was plastered to his frame. “What do we do?”

Frostpaw lurched forward, her paws slithering over the muddy grass. She had to help these cats. She half fell, half slid toward the torrent, fear pulsing in her blood; then the mist rolled toward her and she was engulfed once again.

She dug her claws into the earth and steadied herself, her heart pounding. The rain had stopped; the thunder quieted. She felt grass beneath her paws, and as the fog lifted, she found herself on the moonlit bank of another stretch of river. The water chattered softly, rippling with starlight as it washed over pebbles. Reeds crowded the shallows a little farther downstream, and Frostpaw saw among them two cats. One—a spotted golden she-cat—stood like a warrior, her head high, her tail swishing, her amber gaze glowing with pride. The other was a tom, and Frostpaw felt a flicker of recognition. She narrowed her eyes, wondering if she'd seen him someplace else. His broad shoulders and tabby pelt reminded her of Bramblestar when he had been leader of ThunderClan. And yet this tom's eyes glinted with a greed she'd never seen in Bramblestar's gaze.

"Borders create hunger," the tom mewed.

The golden she-cat seemed to agree. "Fewer Clans means more prey."

"Exactly." The tom licked a paw and ran it over his ear. "Does this mean you're finally ready to shake things up a bit?"

"Yes." The she-cat looked excited.

"RiverClan and ShadowClan will become one?"

Frostpaw's breath caught. *RiverClan and ShadowClan?* What was this? Who were these cats?

As her thoughts raced, the landscape suddenly switched. She wasn't beside the river anymore. She was in the RiverClan camp. It was morning and sunshine was spilling into the clearing. She looked around eagerly. Was she home? She stiffened as she saw warriors. They were huddled beside the camp wall, skinny, half-starved, their pelts dull. A vicious-looking tom paced in front of them.

"Are you ready to swear allegiance to the Kin?" He glared down at one cat in particular.

Frostpaw realized with a jolt that the warrior huddled in front of him was Reedwhisker. She barely recognized him. She'd never seen

Reedwhisker cower in front of any cat, but now he crouched low, his emaciated belly pressed to the earth.

“What was that, Reedwhisker?” the vicious tom asked. “I didn’t quite hear you. Say it again, louder this time.”

Frostpaw could feel Reedwhisker’s pelt burn with humiliation as he repeated the words. “I swear allegiance to the Kin.” Her heart broke with pity at the sight of his desperation.

The vicious tom’s eyes gleamed. With a snarl of disgust, he flung a scrawny mouse at Reedwhisker, then another at the cats huddled behind. As Reedwhisker pounced on the prey and gulped it down, more fierce-looking rogues padded from the shadows and began to advance on the battered RiverClan warriors.

No! Dread hollowed Frostpaw’s belly, but before she could see what happened next, sunshine blinked at her. She screwed up her eyes and peered out, surprised to find herself near the ravine at the edge of ShadowClan territory. Her pelt prickled with foreboding as she recognized the rocks jutting out in front of her. This was where she’d seen Reedwhisker die. She backed away. She didn’t want to see the vision again. She began to tremble as Reedwhisker shimmered into view, his tail to the steep drop and Splashtail padding closer, malice in his eyes.

Please stop! Why was she being shown these dreadful things? Were they a warning? Was she about to die? Did StarClan want her to bring these memories with her?

Overwhelmed, she looked for the mist. She wanted to hide in it, safe from visions, safe from suffering.

“Frostpaw.” A familiar voice called to her, and she realized she was on the same sunny riverbank where she’d met Riverstar for the first time during her mission to the park cats.

She spun around, relief swamping her as she took in his pelt, rippling with starlight. “Did *you* show me these visions?”

His green gaze was sad. “I’m sorry you had to see them,” he mewed. “But they’re important.”

“I don’t recognize them.” She hesitated. “Apart from when Splashtail . . .” She swallowed. If only she’d seen through Splashtail at the beginning instead of being blinded by a foolish crush. None of this would have happened.

“They were moments from our past,” Riverstar told her solemnly. “Times when RiverClan might have disappeared forever.”

“But it didn’t,” Frostpaw mewed. “It won’t.”

“It might.” His gaze grew solemn.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why will this time be any different?”

“Because this time the danger comes from within.”

“Splashtail is dead!” she told him. “I killed him!”

Riverstar shook his head slowly. “That wasn’t enough. RiverClan still might disappear.”

“It won’t!” she mewed fiercely. She’d done so much for her Clan. It *had* to be enough to ensure its survival.

“Follow me.” Riverstar began to head along the riverbank.

Frostpaw hung back. Was he going to show her another vision?

He glanced back at her. Reluctantly she padded after him. The mist swept in. It swallowed the river and the trees until all she could see was Riverstar’s pelt glittering ahead of her. Her paws pricked with foreboding as she smelled the scent of rotting reeds. She could taste decaying ivy and bedding so stale it was putrid. As the mist cleared, she saw collapsed dens and broken camp walls. Riverstar stood among them, his eyes glistening with fear. This was the RiverClan camp. Nothing stirred. Only the sound of the river filled the silence as it swept past unseen while a cold breeze funneled through the gaps in the camp wall.

“What happened?”

Riverstar didn’t answer. He swished his tail, and Frostpaw found herself in another deserted camp. She recognized the torn brambles and overgrown clearing. This was ShadowClan’s camp. Another swish, and they were in ThunderClan’s hollow. The Highledge had begun to crumble into the clearing. The dens were no more than trailing brambles, open to the sky.

“Stop it!” Frostpaw glared at Riverstar. “If WindClan and SkyClan are gone too, I don’t want to see it!” Had she been through everything for this? Why hadn’t he warned her before she’d tried so hard to make her Clanmates understand? Why hadn’t he told her she was wasting her time?

“They’re all gone,” Riverstar told her. “The camps are deserted; the warriors have left.”

“Where?”

He looked at her. “Who knows?”

Frostpaw stared at him in disbelief. “Couldn’t StarClan save them?”

“Only you can save them,” he told her. “But first you must wake up.”

“How can I?” Blood was pounding in her ears. “I’m not strong enough.” She looked around at the devastated camp. “I couldn’t stop Curlfeather. I couldn’t stop Splashtail. How could I stop *this*?”

“You have to try.” Riverstar’s gaze bored into her.

“But no one listens,” she wailed. “No one listens!”

She felt the ground jerk beneath her and struggled to keep her balance as she found herself alone in the mist once more. Grief pierced her heart. *Why me?* Why couldn’t StarClan choose someone stronger? A cat who’d be taken seriously.

Not me. Not a cat whose voice had never been loud enough.

She felt the mist move ahead of her and saw a shape in the haze. A tom was padding toward her. *Riverstar?* She narrowed her eyes as she recognized his yellow pelt. “Tree?” What was a SkyClan cat doing here?

“I’ve been looking for you,” he mewed.

He’d reached her in a dream. But he wasn’t a medicine cat. Then she remembered—this tom could see spirits. *Am I a spirit now?*

“We need you to wake up,” Tree told her gently.

Not you too! Irritation sparked through Frostpaw’s pelt. “Why can’t you all just leave me alone?”

“RiverClan needs you,” Tree told her.

“I’m tired,” she mewed. “I’m tired of it all.”

“Don’t you want to save RiverClan?” Tree mewed.

“I saved them once!” She flexed her claws in frustration. “Now I’m dying. Isn’t that enough?”

“You don’t have to die.” Tree’s eyes rounded beseechingly. “You can come back. You *have* to. Splashtail might be gone, but RiverClan can’t carry on without you.”

Frostpaw was suddenly too tired to speak. Her bones felt like rock, her pelt like earth. She’d done nothing but fight for her Clan. She’d worn herself out trying to make them hear her. She’d argued

and reasoned and they'd turned their tails on her. She didn't have the strength to fight for them anymore.

I'm sorry. She blinked helplessly at Tree, then turned away. *I'm too tired.* She padded into the mist. She would hide here. She'd let the gentle fog comfort and protect her. This time, RiverClan was going to have to find its own way.

Chapter 19

Nightheart narrowed his eyes against the bitter wind as he led Lizardtail and Gorseclaw across the shore.

Sunbeam was beside him, her pelt fluffed out against the cold. “Cloudtail says that if the wind doesn’t change soon, it’ll bring snow,” she mewed.

Nightheart shivered with more than just cold. “Let’s hope Frostpaw starts to recover before it arrives.” He tried to push away the anxiety that had been tugging in his belly for days. Clouds were already pushing down from the mountains, gray and heavy. He was scared that, even tucked in a nest deep inside the medicine den, Frostpaw was too weak to survive snow and ice.

“If she dies, RiverClan won’t be able to share with StarClan,” Lizardtail grumbled.

“We won’t be able to ask them who the next leader is,” Gorseclaw fretted.

Nightheart flattened his ears. Was that the only reason they wanted Frostpaw to survive? “Is that all they care about?” he growled to Sunbeam under his breath.

“They’re worried about RiverClan falling apart,” she whispered back. “‘If the frost cannot stay, the river will dry,’ remember?”

Mothwing had promised to send word as soon as Frostpaw woke, but there had been no news from the RiverClan camp. They were heading there now. Nightheart wanted to see for himself how Frostpaw was doing, and Squirrelstar had sent Lizardtail and Gorseclaw with them. Was she hoping the RiverClan warriors would stay in the RiverClan camp once they’d spent time with their Clanmates?

If the frost cannot stay . . . StarClan’s prophecy had been gnawing in his belly since he’d heard it. “I know they’re scared,” he whispered to Sunbeam. “But they don’t seem to care what Frostpaw went through to save them. They’re only bothered about whether she can help them again.”

“We can hear you,” Lizardtail grunted from behind.

Nightheart glanced back at the light brown tom. Part of him was glad they'd heard.

"We do care," Gorseclaw told him. "About Frostpaw."

"It just feels like she's given up on us," Lizardtail mewed. "Like she doesn't *want* to get better. Like she doesn't care what happens now that Splashtail's gone."

"Perhaps she's just hoping you can figure this out for yourselves," Nightheart growled. "She saved you from Splashtail. Maybe you can take it from here."

"How?" Lizardtail blinked at him. "We can't talk to StarClan. Nor can Mothwing. And we can't survive without a leader."

"If Frostpaw could just get better," Gorseclaw mewed, "and help us once more, then RiverClan could recover."

Nightheart's pelt twitched irritably. He knew they were right, but it still felt like Frostpaw's Clanmates had never acknowledged the risks she'd taken for them. "She might wake up if she felt her Clanmates supported her."

"We *do* support her," Lizardtail snapped.

Gorseclaw glanced at his father. "Maybe now, but . . ." His eyes rounded with guilt. "We did kind of choose Splashtail over her. When she came to the Gathering. She warned us and we didn't believe her."

Yeah! Nightheart huffed. *You let her live like an outcast while you hunted and fought for a fox-heart.*

They'd reached the reed beds, and Nightheart let the RiverClan cats take the lead. This was their territory, after all.

At the camp, Lizardtail and Gorseclaw headed away to share gossip with Minnowtail. The clearing looked deserted, and Nightheart wondered if the other warriors were out hunting or whether they'd abandoned their Clan too.

Havenpelt was still here, sitting outside the nursery, her pelt fluffed out as she watched Floatkit, Troutkit, and Rapidkit tumbling and play-fighting a few tail-lengths away. The kits seemed to have recovered from their ordeal, but he wondered if they had nightmares too.

Sunbeam glanced at Nightheart. "Are you okay?" she asked. "You seem touchy today."

“I’m worried about Frostpaw.” He looked up. The clouds were darkening and the distant mountains were turning white.

Sunbeam brushed against him as they neared the medicine den. “Trust in StarClan,” she mewed gently.

“They seem as helpless as we are,” he mewed. “All they can do is send warnings.”

Mothwing padded out of her den, her eyes lighting up as she saw them.

“Can we see her?” Nightheart asked.

The brightness in Mothwing’s eyes faded. “She looks very frail.” She glanced at the den. “I’ve been giving her water, but she hasn’t eaten, and she’s lost a lot of weight.”

Nightheart’s heart pricked with worry. “Do you know *why* she hasn’t woken up?”

“No.” Mothwing looked defeated. “Her wound is healing, and her fever’s gone down, but I just can’t rouse her.”

Sunbeam glanced past her. “Squirrelstar said that she spent time in StarClan when she was very sick. Maybe Frostpaw’s visiting there too and she’ll be back soon.”

“Tree saw her spirit,” Mothwing told her.

Nightheart’s pulse quickened. “Where?”

“On the riverbank. But she was surrounded by mist.”

“Did he speak to her?”

“He told her RiverClan needed her and that she had to come home.” Mothwing’s eyes were glittering with worry. “But she turned away from him.”

Nightheart’s heart sank. “Doesn’t she *want* to come home?”

“Perhaps it’s just too hard.” Mothwing sighed.

Nightheart padded into the medicine den. Sunbeam followed and stopped next to him beside the small reed nest at the back. Frostpaw looked shrunken inside, a bundle of fur and bones, her face thin, her tail damp and limp. For a moment he wondered if she was dead. Then he saw her chest move. It was no more than a flutter. He looked anxiously toward Mothwing as she followed them in. “She looks so ill.”

“I warned you,” Mothwing mewed.

Sunbeam gazed down at Frostpaw, her eyes round. “Is there really nothing you can do?”

“It’s up to Frostpaw now,” Mothwing mewed.

Nightheart leaned down and lapped Frostpaw’s ear. “Wake up,” he whispered. But she didn’t move.

Sunbeam reached in with her paw and gently stroked Frostpaw’s shoulder. “We miss you,” she breathed.

“How is she?” Gorseclaw padded in. He looked nervously at Frostpaw’s nest but didn’t venture close.

Lizardtail nosed in behind her. “Does she look like she’s getting better?”

“She’s still very sick,” Mothwing told them.

Gorseclaw’s eyes darkened. “How will we ever become a real Clan again?”

Mothwing was staring out sadly at the camp. “I’m beginning to forget what a real Clan is,” she mewed. “Sometimes I think that even if Frostpaw recovers, we’ll never get back to the way it was when Mistystar was leader.”

“Don’t say that.” Gorseclaw looked alarmed.

“She’s right, though.” Lizardtail’s ears twitched. “RiverClan is dying.” He looked at Nightheart. “We’re not staying here.”

“But I thought you’d want to spend more time with your Clanmates,” Nightheart mewed. Squirrelstar would be disappointed to see them return to ThunderClan.

“ThunderClan feels more like a real Clan,” Lizardtail told him.

Mothwing’s gaze flashed toward the light brown tom. “Where’s your loyalty?” she snapped.

“There’s nothing left to be loyal to,” Lizardtail mewed. “This isn’t RiverClan.” He looked out at the clearing. “It’s just a ragtag bunch of warriors who don’t know where they belong.”

“They belong here,” Mothwing growled. “And so do you.”

“A warrior needs something to protect,” Lizardtail argued. “There’s nothing here left to protect.”

“Protect Havenpelt! And her kits! And what about Mosspelt?” Mothwing bristled.

“They should leave too.” Gorseclaw sighed. “There’s no leader here—and without a leader there’s no Clan.”

“Mallownose says a Clan doesn’t need a leader,” Mothwing argued. “He might be right. There are still hunting patrols and the fresh-kill pile is full. The camp is fixed now thanks to Nightheart and the others. Once Frostpaw wakes up, we can find a leader.”

“Look at her.” Gorseclaw nodded toward Frostpaw’s nest. “Do you really think she’s going to wake up?”

“I’m not giving up on her,” Mothwing mewed hotly.

Gorseclaw turned away. “We’ll wait outside,” he told Nightheart, “until you’re ready to leave.”

Nightheart watched, shocked, as Gorseclaw and Lizardtail padded away. “Don’t they care about their Clan?” He glanced at Sunbeam. “Frostpaw mustn’t die,” he mewed. “She’s been through so much. She can’t give up now.”

“She won’t.” Sunbeam touched her nose to his ear, and her warm breath comforted him. “She’ll keep fighting. She’s Frostpaw, remember?”

He looked into Frostpaw’s nest again. She was so small, like a kit. How had she ever had the strength to travel to the park? He remembered her sitting from dawn till dusk on the riverbank, meditating in the cold and the rain, refusing to move until she’d found the answers she was looking for. And since she’d returned, she’d never stopped trying to persuade the Clans to help. She’d kept pushing and pushing, making sure everyone knew that Splashtail would destroy whatever he got his claws into.

Nightheart leaned close to her, frightened by how cold she was. “Don’t listen to Gorseclaw and Lizardtail,” he whispered. “RiverClan will survive. But it needs you to return. I know it seems hard. You’ve done so much and yet there’s still so much left to do. But you won’t be alone. I’ll be here. And Sunbeam. We’ll help you. We’ll do whatever you need. You won’t be fighting on your own anymore. We’ll be with you. The Clans will be with you. Just be brave a little longer.”

He watched her, his own breath as shallow as hers as he prayed for a sign that she’d heard him and that she wanted to come back. But she didn’t move. Only the tiny fluttering of her chest showed she was still with them.

He looked at Mothwing. “Snow’s coming,” he mewed anxiously.

“It will insulate the den.” Her mew sounded sure but her eyes glittered with fear.

Nightheart felt a jab of pity for her. She seemed to need reassurance as much as he did. “Perhaps,” he agreed softly. But it was a slender reed to lean on. Now that he’d seen how thin and frail Frostpaw was, he was certain she’d freeze to death if snow reached the camp.

Mothwing dropped her gaze. “Every time I sleep, I’m frightened she’ll be gone when I wake up.”

Nightheart reached his paw into Frostpaw’s nest. He laid it over hers, his heart aching. He could feel Sunbeam beside him, her soft fur against his. “We’re waiting for you,” he whispered to Frostpaw. “Please come back.” She didn’t move.

Please.

Chapter 20

The biting wind had been cutting through Sunbeam's pelt, so she was grateful when the patrol reached the shelter of the trees. She was relieved too that Gorseclaw and Lizardtail kept their thoughts to themselves on the way back from the RiverClan camp. They'd sounded heartless in Mothwing's den. She knew they were still shocked by what had happened in RiverClan, and they must be frightened about what would happen next, but that didn't mean they could be callous. She could see Nightheart's pelt still prickling. She was worried that if Gorseclaw or Lizardtail said one more word about Frostpaw dying, he might turn on them.

She'd been shaken by how Frostpaw had appeared. She'd hoped they'd find her a little stronger, but she'd looked on the verge of death. And the RiverClan camp had felt empty and hopeless. If Frostpaw did die, Sunbeam wondered how long the remaining cats would stay. Mallownose believed they could go on without a leader, but how could that be true? Maybe it *could* work if nothing *bad* happened, but Sunbeam had heard stories of rogues moving onto Clan territory, and of border disputes turning to war when hunger or sickness came to the lake. A Clan needed a leader to hold it together when trouble came.

As they neared the ThunderClan hollow, Sunbeam shook out her pelt. Evening was moving into night, and the forest felt muffled, smothered by cloud. Sunbeam saw a snowflake drifting down between the branches. She looked anxiously at Nightheart. Had he noticed it?

What if Frostpaw *did* die? She was like kin now. Nightheart would say that *he* should have fought Splashtail, not her. He'd say that if he'd tried harder, he could have persuaded Squirrelstar to intervene before it was too late. He'd find a way of taking responsibility for her death.

Sunbeam moved closer, letting her pelt brush his, and Nightheart glanced at her, surprised, as though he'd been lost in thought. The snow was coming down thicker now. His gaze flitted to the dancing

flakes, but he didn't comment, only quickened his pace as they reached the slope down to the hollow.

He ducked through the thorn tunnel, and Sunbeam followed. She felt cheered by the sight of the ThunderClan camp. RiverClan's island had felt empty and exposed. Here, the large bramble dens crowding the edge of the clearing looked warm and safe. The full fresh-kill pile filled the camp with warm, rich scents, and even though snow was settling in the clearing, the cliffs sheltered the Clan from the bitter wind. *Should we have brought Frostpaw home with us?* Sunbeam dismissed the thought. Frostpaw had looked far too weak to survive a journey through freezing snow.

Squirrelstar was on the Highledge with Brambleclaw. She got to her paws, her gaze narrowing as she saw Gorseclaw and Lizardtail. Sunbeam guessed she'd been hoping they wouldn't return.

Bayshine and Myrtlebloom were sharing a thrush below the ledge. Bristlepaw and Graypaw were practicing battle moves in the clear space beside them, while Molewhisker adjusted Stempaw's paws as the young apprentice hunkered down in a hunting stance.

Sparkpelt looked up, her eyes alight as she saw Nightheart. She blinked brightly at Sunbeam, clearly pleased to see them home. Finchlight was chewing on a sparrow beside her. Around the camp, ThunderClan were sharing tongues with their evening meal.

Poppyfrost paused washing herself as Gorseclaw and Lizardtail headed for the fresh-kill pile. She watched them coolly. Outside the elders' den, Brackenfur and Thornclaw eyed the RiverClan cats. Sunbeam guessed that Squirrelstar wasn't the only warrior who had been hoping Gorseclaw and Lizardtail would remain in the RiverClan camp.

The ThunderClan leader leaped down the rock tumble and pulled up as she reached Sunbeam and Nightheart. "I thought they were going to stay," she mewed, watching the RiverClan cats rummage through the fresh-kill pile.

"They didn't want to," Sunbeam told her.

Poppyfrost was watching them too. "Make sure the elders have prey before you take some," she called.

Lizardtail shot the tortoiseshell-and-white warrior a look. "We're warriors, not rogues."

Gorseclaw was already carrying a pigeon toward Brackenfur and Thornclaw. He dropped it in front of them and dipped his head before padding to the nursery. “Have you eaten, Daisy?” he called through the entrance.

“Yes, thanks,” Daisy called back.

Squirrelstar’s tail flicked irritably. Why? The RiverClan warriors were behaving well. Was she irritated that they seemed so comfortable here? Sunbeam’s pelt twitched uneasily. Had ThunderClan watched *her* like this when she’d taken prey from the fresh-kill pile? “It was kind of bleak at the RiverClan camp,” she told Squirrelstar. “I’m not surprised they didn’t want to stay.”

Gorseclaw padded toward them. “It doesn’t look like RiverClan is going to be getting a leader anytime soon,” he mewed. “I think we should start trying out for ThunderClan.” He beckoned Lizardtail over. “When can we take our first trial?”

Sunbeam noticed Squirrelstar stiffen.

“Don’t you think you should wait a bit longer to see what happens in RiverClan?” the ThunderClan leader mewed.

“I thought we weren’t taking in any more warriors,” Molewhisker called.

Gorseclaw looked at him. “This is different,” he told him. “We’re Clanless.”

“Not exactly Clanless—” Squirrelstar began, but Lizardtail cut her off.

“RiverClan is in the same mess it was moons ago, when all this started,” he told her.

“We’ll be better off here,” Gorseclaw mewed.

Sunbeam had noticed that Nightheart was glaring at the RiverClan cats. Didn’t he want them here either? Or was he still angry about their attitude in the RiverClan camp?

“You should be helping your Clan,” he snapped.

“Helping with what?” Lizardtail asked. “We’re not medicine cats. We can’t find a new leader. All we can do is wait around to see if Frostpaw recovers.”

“Is she any better?” Squirrelstar asked Nightheart. She sounded hopeful.

“No.” Nightheart dropped his gaze. “I think she’s worse.”

Squirrelstar glanced at the snow falling into the hollow.

“I don’t think she’s going to be finding a leader anytime soon,” Lizardtail mewed. “ThunderClan is our only option.”

Squirrelstar snapped her gaze toward him. “I thought I’d made ThunderClan’s position clear at the Gathering,” she mewed coldly. “We’re not taking in warriors right now.”

Sunbeam’s paws prickled. Would she be the last warrior ThunderClan accepted from another Clan? What about the changes that had been made to the warrior code? Besides, Lizardtail and Gorseclaw were already living with ThunderClan. “Surely Lizardtail and Gorseclaw could—”

Squirrelstar cut her off. “If we take them, how can we refuse others?” She squared her shoulders. “Leaf-bare has only just begun, prey is already scarce, and if RiverClan is going to fall apart, we might find ourselves swamped with cats looking for a new Clan.”

Squirrelstar sounded so determined that Sunbeam didn’t answer, but she couldn’t help feeling it was cruel to deny any cat a home.

Gorseclaw’s eyes began to glitter anxiously. “If you’re worried about prey,” he mewed, “we can fish in the lake. RiverClan rarely goes hungry in leaf-bare. We could even catch fish for your warriors.”

Poppyfrost pulled a face. “We don’t eat fish.”

Molewhisker growled. “We prefer prey that doesn’t stink up the hollow.”

Gorseclaw and Lizardtail blinked at them. They seemed surprised by ThunderClan’s sudden hostility.

Thornclaw called from the elders’ den. “If you want to fish, go back to your own Clan where no one minds the smell.”

“Stop stinking up the warriors’ den,” Molewhisker called. “If I wanted to breathe fish-breath, I’d sleep in the lake.”

“They’re warriors!” Squirrelstar shot the two cats a warning look. “Show some respect.”

Sunbeam felt a flash of gratitude to the ThunderClan leader. Some of ThunderClan’s warriors had been unfriendly when she’d first come to the hollow. But they’d never been rude.

Lizardtail’s pelt ruffled angrily, but Gorseclaw looked scared.

“You have to take us in,” he mewed. “We can’t go back. What if another warrior tries to take over like Splashtail did? What if rogues come? There’s no one to protect us.”

“Can’t you protect one another?” Nightheart mewed. “That’s what warriors are supposed to do.”

Lizardtail snorted. “That’s easy for you to say,” he mewed. “You haven’t had your Clan wrecked by an evil cat.”

“We don’t know who to trust anymore,” Gorseclaw chimed.

Sunbeam imagined that ThunderClan felt it *had* nearly been wrecked by Ashfur, who had nearly torn the Clan apart by posing as Bramblestar while the real leader wandered the Dark Forest. Still, she felt a twinge of sympathy for Gorseclaw and Lizardtail. She’d watched RiverClan cats, whom she’d thought were true warriors, kill her mother. It had made her wonder how much it would take for ThunderClan to behave like rogues, or ShadowClan, or WindClan. “Maybe RiverClan *isn’t* safe anymore,” she ventured.

“That’s not a good enough reason.” Squirrelstar looked determined. “They must *want* to be ThunderClan warriors.”

“We do want to be ThunderClan warriors,” Lizardtail mewed.

Squirrelstar looked at him. “Why?”

“You’re friendly . . . and you’re . . . brave . . . and . . .” He seemed to be reaching for every word.

“Are we better than RiverClan?” Squirrelstar asked.

He blinked at her.

Gorseclaw cut in. “It’s not a question of being better or worse,” she mewed. “We can rely on ThunderClan, but we can’t rely on RiverClan anymore.”

“We’re not here to be relied on,” Squirrelstar mewed sternly.

“You let *Sunbeam* in.”

Sunbeam shifted self-consciously as Gorseclaw stared at her.

“She wanted to join,” Squirrelstar mewed. “She didn’t have to. She didn’t consider us her *only option*.” She glanced at Lizardtail as she quoted his phrase back at him.

Lizardtail’s ears flicked irritably. “She joined to be with her mate,” he mewed. “Not because she thought ThunderClan was better than ShadowClan.”

“It’s not that simple.” Fernstripe padded forward.

Sunbeam hadn't noticed the gray tabby she-cat in the shadows beside the warriors' den. Fernstripe had left WindClan moons ago to be with Shellfur.

"I joined ThunderClan to be with my mate." Fernstripe stopped beside the RiverClan warriors. "But when I moved here, I realized that the things I loved about Shellfur were ThunderClan things. I loved the way he smelled of leaves and the way he was interested in other Clans and how he was happy to get involved in their problems. The rest of ThunderClan is the same, and I like it. I'd always felt cut off on the moor, but here in the forest I feel like I'm living in the heart of the Clans."

Sunbeam's paws had been itching eagerly as Fernstripe spoke. "That's how I felt!" she exclaimed. "I came here to be with Nightheart, but when I got here I realized how much I love the scent of ThunderClan prey and the way the wind swishes through the leaves and how much ThunderClan thinks about other Clans. I love the way they tease one another and how nosy they are. Once I'd gotten used to being here, it felt like all the cats were a little bit like Nightheart. Don't get me wrong, I loved ShadowClan, but I feel I belong here." She blinked at Gorseclaw. "Do you really think you could be happy eating furry prey and being surrounded by trees? Won't you miss the river and the sky?"

Gorseclaw seemed to hesitate. "I guess." He glanced at Lizardtail, and Sunbeam noticed that his shoulders had slumped. They both suddenly seemed smaller, lost and far from home.

But Lizardtail hadn't given up. "What if RiverClan falls apart?" he asked. "Would you take us in then?"

Squirrelstar met his gaze steadily. "Shouldn't you be there, making sure it doesn't fall apart?"

Gorseclaw nudged his father. "She's right," she mewed. "We ought to go home."

Sunbeam was relieved. It would have felt bad turning them away, but if they *chose* to go home there was no need to feel guilty.

"You can stay tonight," Squirrelstar offered.

Lizardtail sniffed. "We don't want to stink up the warriors' den for another night."

“Find a space in the medicine den,” Squirrelstar told him. “Jayfeather will complain, but he complains about everything, so I wouldn’t worry.”

As she headed up the rock tumble, and Gorseclaw and Lizardtail went to find nests in the medicine den, Sunbeam noticed that Nightheart looked worried. The snow was falling thickly now, and his black pelt was flecked with flakes.

She guessed he was thinking about Frostpaw. “Don’t forget what Mothwing told you,” she said encouragingly. “Snow will insulate the dens.”

“I hope she’s right.” His mew sounded bleak.

“Come on.” Sunbeam padded toward the fresh-kill pile, calling over her shoulder. “You must be hungry. I know I am.” As Nightheart trailed after her, she chose a thrush and carried it to the shelter of the Highledge. She settled beside him and tore it in half, giving Nightheart the biggest piece. He took a bite and they ate in silence for a while. Then she felt Nightheart looking at her.

“Did you mean what you said?” he asked. “About liking ThunderClan because it’s a bit like me?”

“Yes.” She took a mouthful of the thrush. It was still warm and tasted musky. She swallowed it happily and licked her lips.

Nightheart narrowed his eyes. “Does that mean you could have fallen in love with any ThunderClan warrior?”

“Don’t be silly.” She poked him with her paw. “I love you because you’re you. It’s just a bonus that you’re so ThunderClanny.” She glanced across the clearing to where Fernstripe had settled down beside Shellfur. “You’re lucky,” she mewed. “I like you because you’re warm and funny. Fernstripe likes Shellfur because he smells like leaves.”

Nightheart tipped his head to one side, a playful sparkle in his eyes. “*How* warm am I?”

Sunbeam suddenly realized he’d been teasing her. “As warm as a greenleaf day,” she told him.

“And how funny?” he pressed, purring.

She leaned forward and nuzzled him, her heart swelling with affection. “You’re the best cat in the whole forest, and I would have fallen for you whatever Clan you were from.”

“Nightheart.”

Lionblaze’s mew woke Sunbeam.

“Nightheart!” he called again.

She lifted her head blearily. The warriors’ den was still dark. How long until dawn? Around her, the ThunderClan warriors were asleep in their nests, but Nightheart was scrambling to his paws.

Lionblaze was calling through the entrance, keeping his mew low. “Hurry up! Duskfur is here!”

Duskfur? Sunbeam leaped up. She stumbled after Nightheart, still fighting sleep, and ducked out of the den after him.

The clearing was covered in a thick layer of snow. The branches at the top of the hollow creaked beneath the weight of it. The wind had dropped, and stillness gripped the forest. Lionblaze had been on guard, and his ear tips were caked with snow. Across the clearing, Duskfur shifted impatiently. Her eyes gleamed in the darkness, and Sunbeam’s heart dropped. The brown tabby she-cat didn’t look as though she’d brought good news.

Nightheart was staring at her. He seemed to be frozen.

“What does she want?” Sunbeam asked.

“She’s come to fetch you,” Lionblaze whispered. “Frostpaw has taken a turn for the worse.”

Sunbeam’s mouth grew dry.

Lionblaze’s gaze was dark. “Mothwing says you should see her before it’s too late.”

Chapter 21

Frostpaw shrank away as wet moss brushed her mouth. She longed for the moisture, but how could she swallow? She barely had the strength to move her lips. She could smell Mothwing's scent and feel a paw on her chest, a muzzle beside her cheek; she heard someone whisper: *Breathe.* She tried, struggling to pull in one more breath, one more gasp, as though air was the last thread tethering her to life.

She fell into blackness. Mothwing's scent disappeared, along with the weight of her paw, the heat of her muzzle. Sensation stopped. Frostpaw was nowhere and there was nothing.

"Frostpaw." A deep mew sounded in her ear. She'd heard it before. Its affection and its richness were familiar, from a memory lodged deep in her past. "Frostpaw." It sounded again, and suddenly she felt warmth on her pelt, smelled meadow scent, felt grass beneath her paws, soft and dewy. She opened her eyes.

A pair of gray eyes was gazing back at her. The wide face of a gentle tom. Thick gray fur. She knew him, although she hadn't seen him since she was a kit. "Jayclaw?" She barely remembered her father, but the love glowing in his eyes told her that it was him.

"Yes," he purred, his gray eyes sparkling. There were stars glittering in his pelt, and behind him bright green fields rolled toward a deep blue sky. Flowers blossomed; trees shimmered in full leaf.

Energy buzzed inside Frostpaw. She scrambled to her paws and breathed deeply, drawing in the sweet, clear air, astonished by the beauty of the land stretching around her. "This is StarClan, right?"

"Yes." Jayclaw swished his tail, and the grass behind him shivered.

Frostpaw felt a prickle of fear as she realized what it meant to be here. "Am I dead?"

Jayclaw blinked slowly. "No," he mewed. "But you can stay if you want to. I'd like to show you all of it." He nodded toward the distant horizon. "It goes on forever."

Frostpaw's heart seemed to press in her throat. He wanted her here. He loved her. She could see it in his eyes. She could hear it in his voice. Love surged in her chest like a frightened kit running for its

mother. She'd had no idea how much she'd longed for such warmth, such connection, such acceptance. She realized, with a pang, just how measured her mother's love had been. Curlfeather's kindness had always been given in exchange for obedience or success or something Frostpaw could never understand. But Jayclaw needed nothing. He was only pleased she was here. She wanted to stay here, stay with him, stay forever.

"I want to see it," she purred. "But . . ." An old feeling was worming into her happiness, like a claw feeling for an old wound.

Jayclaw's eyes rounded with concern as she hesitated. "What's wrong?"

"I have responsibilities."

"To whom?"

"RiverClan."

Jayclaw looked concerned. "You've done so much to serve RiverClan already, my brave kit. What about your responsibility to yourself?"

"To me?" Frostpaw stared at him. *Is that important?*

"Don't you deserve to be happy?" he asked. "How much can they expect you to give?"

"But I have to save my Clan." The old feeling was growing stronger, and she recognized it now—it was fear. "They need me."

Jayclaw didn't seem to understand. "Is it *your* duty to save RiverClan?"

Frostpaw stared at him. Was it? She'd never wondered that before. It felt good to question it. "Am I allowed to let them work it out by themselves?"

"You're allowed to do whatever you like," he told her. "You're not the only cat in RiverClan. There are others. Let them worry. Here, I can look after you the way that I was never able to in life. You've suffered so much already. I want you to be happy."

Frostpaw searched his gaze, finding only sincerity. She never wanted to go back. Why would she leave a place where she could feel at peace, loved, and appreciated only for herself. She'd be listened to here. She'd be heard. "I could stay." She began to purr. "I could even guide RiverClan." Wasn't that what StarClan warriors did—guide the paw steps of their Clanmates through dreams? "I could

send them visions!” It would be so much easier. She looked in Jayclaw’s eyes for the approval she knew she’d find. “I can, can’t I?”

Before he could answer, Jayclaw’s face blurred, the landscape shifted, the ground moved beneath her paws. The vivid colors faded. The air soured. Panic sparked in Frostpaw’s chest as she found herself on the riverbank, beneath a heavy sky, the lake wide and gray beyond the reed beds.

“There you are!” Tree was hurrying toward her. “I thought I’d lost you. You need to come back.”

“Back?” She watched him hurry past her and head toward the path leading to RiverClan’s camp.

“Hurry!” He beckoned her with his tail.

“I can’t come!” She hesitated.

“But you’re needed!” His ears were twitching anxiously.

Frostpaw’s heart pounded; fear churned in her belly. But her paws began to follow the SkyClan tom. *No!* She tried to resist, but they drew her on. “I don’t belong there anymore!” she wailed. “I was in StarClan.”

He glanced back at her. “You can’t give up,” he called. “RiverClan needs you.”

“But I can still guide their paws,” she told him. “Jayclaw was there, and it was beautiful.”

But Tree wasn’t listening. He kept hurrying, faster and faster, until she had to run to keep up.

“I don’t need to be here,” she yowled after him. “I can guide them from StarClan!”

At the camp entrance, he faced her. “*How* will you guide them?”

“I’ll send visions.”

“To whom?” He blinked at her.

“To—” She suddenly realized that she was the only cat in RiverClan who could share with StarClan. Without her, there would be no way to get a message to them. Her breath caught. Without her, RiverClan would be cut off completely from StarClan.

“Don’t you see?” Tree leaned forward urgently.

I don’t want to! All she wanted was to be with Jayclaw. To be in StarClan. To be happy. Why did she have to keep worrying about her Clanmates? Why couldn’t they manage without her?

“RiverClan needs a leader,” Tree pressed. “And you’re the only one who can tell them who it should be.”

The sadness that had dragged at her for moons rushed back. She looked at her paws and saw them shimmering and ghostlike, and she wondered how they could feel so heavy when they were nothing but spirit.

“I know it’s hard.” Tree’s eyes glittered with sympathy. “But without you, RiverClan will disappear.”

“But I—” Her heart sank like a stone. She had to go back to RiverClan. “Okay,” she murmured. But Tree was already ducking through the entrance. She followed him into camp, across the clearing, and into the medicine den, where he stopped beside a nest. He looked into it, at a body curled at the bottom.

It’s me! She was shocked at how dull her pelt was, how thin she’d grown. She looked like stale prey. “What if I *can’t* get back?”

“You have to *try*,” Tree told her. “You’ll never forgive yourself if RiverClan disappears and you didn’t.”

Slowly, every hair on her pelt shrinking from the task, she stepped into the nest. Forcing herself to curl down into her withered body, Frostpaw closed her eyes. As she slid into her exhausted flesh, she felt the weight of her pelt, the effort of breathing. *I need to wake up.* A deep instinct told her that if she just opened her eyes, she’d break out of the torpor that was gripping her. She tried to force them open, trembling with the effort. But she didn’t have the strength. Her body was growing heavier. *I can’t do it! I’m too weak!*

“Keep trying!”

She heard Tree’s mew at her ear and tried harder, but the nest seemed to be sucking her downward.

“You have to do it!” Tree sounded panicked. “*There’s not much time!”*

She imagined greeting her Clanmates, seeing the camp, snuggling in her old nest, swimming in the river. But the more she tried to wake up, the more she seemed to slide into darkness.

“Wait!” Tree’s mew sounded suddenly filled with hope. “*I have an idea. I’ll be right back. Don’t leave!”*

But even then Frostpaw felt herself dissolving into darkness.

“Frostpaw?” Jayclaw’s mew sounded in her ear once more, and she smelled the grassy scent and felt the greenleaf warmth of StarClan’s meadows. She opened her eyes easily and saw her father blinking at her.

“I tried to go back.” She scrambled to her paws. “But it didn’t work. I couldn’t wake up.”

“Perhaps you’re supposed to be here,” Jayclaw purred.

If only. A warm breeze was stirring patterns in the wide meadows. She could see a river glittering like a strand of silver in the distance. “I wish I could be.” Longing seemed to hollow out her belly. She ignored it. “I don’t even know if I can save RiverClan. But I know I can’t give up.”

“You might have no choice,” Jayclaw told her gently. “It might be that you’re supposed to stay in StarClan.”

Am I? Frostpaw looked around, tempted again by the beauty and color and scent of the landscape. She listened for the river. Did it sound like the one at home? But instead of its gentle chatter, she heard voices in the distance. The warm breeze seemed to be carrying them from far away. She pricked her ears. They were singing. “Do you hear it?”

Jayclaw blinked at her, puzzled. “Hear what?”

“Singing . . .” she mewed. “It sounds like she-cats, singing.” The voices grew louder.

“It’s just the wind,” Jayclaw told her, but his voice was quiet. It grew quieter as he went on. “Come with me. Let me show you the river.” He was fading as the singing grew louder, and as he turned away, his starry pelt began to dim. Around him the meadows were growing pale, the trees turning to mist.

The voices swirled around Frostpaw. They lifted her, the sound of their singing resonating deep in her chest until she seemed to hum with it.

Follow the song! Follow the song!

A new voice joined the others, as bright as sunlit water. It twined itself around her heart. *You mustn’t give up on your Clan!* The new voice grew louder, clearer, more insistent, like an order, and it tugged her down, as the grass disappeared beneath her paws, and drew her

through cloud and into darkness, and, the next moment, Frostpaw found herself in her nest.

She opened her eyes. Daylight dazzled her.

“You’re awake!” Mothwing gasped beside her.

The air was cold, the light harsh. Frostpaw began to make out Mothwing’s face. Behind her trembling mentor, she saw Sunbeam and Duskfur and Mistpaw. They were all here. She struggled to lift her head and saw Nightheart and Graypaw and, crowding the entrance, Nightsky and Minnowtail. Outside, her clanmates were jostling to see in. Their eyes were fixed on her, wide and shining with joy as she looked back at them. Her heart skipped a beat. *They were waiting for me. They wanted me to come back.* The realization filled Frostpaw with an emotion so strong, her throat tightened. She couldn’t speak. She felt a rough tongue lapping her head.

“Don’t rush to sit up.” Mothwing was washing her like a queen washing her kit. She sat back, her eyes bright with joy. “Take as much time as you need. We’re just glad you’re with us again.”

Frostpaw was suddenly aware of how weak she felt, but the deathly heaviness had gone. And she was hungry. Then she saw Tree.

The SkyClan tom was outside, blinking at her from among her Clanmates. “You heard the singing.” He pushed his way into the den. “It brought you back.”

“I was in StarClan,” she told him breathlessly. “Then I heard voices. They carried me here.”

“I’ve seen the Sisters do it,” he told her. “I wondered if it would work for you, so I fetched everyone I could think of. All the she-cats who love you.”

Frostpaw looked around once more at the faces of her Clanmates, and at Nightheart and Sunbeam. They really were shining with love for her. Her heart quickened. For the first time in moons, she didn’t feel alone.

Duskfur leaned into her nest. “I’m sorry, Frostpaw.” The brown tabby she-cat’s eyes rounded with apology. “We let you down when you needed us most. We didn’t believe you when you’d gone through so much to try to warn us. It must have been hard.”

Frostpaw felt a lump in her throat. At last, Duskfur truly understood.

“I should have protected you from Curlfeather,” Duskfur went on. “I knew she was ambitious, but I didn’t think she’d hurt her own kit. I should have been more careful. I should have listened.”

Mothwing nodded. “If we’d listened earlier, Harelight might still be alive, and you wouldn’t have suffered so much.”

“We shouldn’t have pressured you to name a leader,” Duskfur went on. “You were so young and inexperienced. We didn’t stop to think about how it must have felt for you to have the whole Clan watching and waiting for you to give them an answer.”

Frostpaw looked at the two she-cats. Hearing them acknowledge what she’d been through felt like a leaf unfurling in her heart. At last they seemed to see her and care about her. The relief made her heart and her paws feel as light as they’d been when she was a spirit.

She blinked at Mothwing. “You were just trying to protect the Clan,” she mewed. “I understand.” She looked at Duskfur. “How could you have guessed that your own kit would do such harm?”

Duskfur looked down at the ground. “We should have helped you more!” she mewed sadly, shaking her head.

“It was selfish of us,” Mothwing murmured. “We were too frightened to care how you were feeling.”

Outside, some of her Clanmates murmured agreement.

Nightheart was watching her. Frostpaw heard him purr as she met his gaze. Sunbeam was looking at her too. Their eyes glowed with affection.

“Thank you for believing in me,” Frostpaw told them. She glanced at her Clanmates. “Thank you for singing for me.” She paused, a thought flashing in her mind. “There was one voice louder than the others.” Was it Mothwing? Duskfur? She blinked questioningly at them.

Mothwing purred. “Didn’t you recognize it?”

Frostpaw frowned, trying to recall the bright, clear mew that had drawn her back here.

Mothwing nodded toward the den entrance. Her Clanmates drew aside, and sunshine sliced into the den. In the dazzling light

Frostpaw could make out a shape made golden by the glare. It shimmered white as though it were made of stars, and Frostpaw blinked. Who was it? Then she saw a pair of bright blue eyes gazing at her and knew at once. “Icewing!”

The white warrior had returned.

Icewing blinked at her lovingly. “I knew it,” she mewed. “I knew you wouldn’t give up on RiverClan.”

Frostpaw felt energy seeping back into her limbs. She could hear once more the bright, clear mew, sharp as ice, clean as snow, calling her back to her Clan. Suddenly, she felt the heavy clouds, which had hung over her for so long, lift. The air seemed light. Her paws felt strong. “You came back.” Frostpaw stared at Icewing. “Just like you promised.” Her heart sang. “And you came just in time.”

Chapter 22

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Frostpaw swallowed back a purr of amusement as Mothwing checked on her again. “I’m fine.”

Her mentor had been watching her every paw step of the way since they’d left the RiverClan camp at sunset. The stream to the Moonpool shimmered in the darkness like a trail of starlight, cutting through the heather, leading to the distant hollow.

“Do you need to stop and rest?” Mothwing fretted. “Kestrelflight and Whistlepaw will understand if we’re late.”

“I think we’re already late,” Frostpaw teased. “You’ve had us walking at snail speed. Let’s just keep going.” She tried again to pick up the pace. “I promise, I’m okay.”

It had been a quarter moon since she’d woken in her nest, surrounded by her friends and Clanmates. She’d grown stronger and stronger each day. So had RiverClan. The warriors who’d left had returned. The camp was looking cared for, the dens clean, the walls strong, the edges free of weeds. It seemed more like the Clan she’d grown up in, which made Curlfeather’s absence all the stranger. From time to time Frostpaw would lift her head, expecting to see her mother duck out of the warriors’ den or cross the clearing to see if there was anything tasty on the fresh-kill pile. And then she’d realize with a jab of grief that the Curlfeather she remembered—the Curlfeather she’d loved—was gone, and that perhaps she’d never really existed. But the loss she felt was quickly filled. A Clanmate would glance at her affectionately as they passed, or Mothwing would lay a piece of fresh-kill beside her and brush her nose over Frostpaw’s ear, half in affection, half in worry, quietly checking that her fever hadn’t returned.

The wound left by Splashtail was healing fast now. There would be a scar, but while it would remind her of everything that had happened, it would also remind her to be thankful that her Clan had suffered so much and yet survived.

Now, as they neared the final climb, she felt tired but happy to be here. The moonlit moor sparkled behind her. The snow had melted,

but a fresh chill had settled over the lake, and the frozen earth crunched beneath her paws.

“Fluff out your pelt,” Mothwing told her anxiously. “I don’t want you getting sick again.”

Frostpaw fluffed her fur obediently. She wasn’t cold—the walk had warmed her—but she wanted to save Mothwing more worry. Mothwing had always been the most practical cat Frostpaw knew. But now she was hovering over Frostpaw like a queen over her kit. Frostpaw was secretly enjoying the fuss. She felt at peace, not just because the worst days were over and she could feel the affection of her Clan in every look and word, but because she’d finally made the choice that had tortured her for moons. She knew with a certainty that felt like a smooth-flowing river who the next leader of RiverClan must be.

She leaped up the last few boulders and landed on the smooth lip of the Moonpool hollow. The lake glittered in the distance. Mothwing landed beside her and began heading down the smooth stone dimpled by countless paw steps. The Moonpool shone at the bottom like a great eye gazing back at the sky, and Frostpaw could see Kestrelflight and Whistlepaw waiting beside it. They got to their paws as Mothwing reached them, lifting their tails when Frostpaw caught up.

“Frostpaw.” Kestrelflight dipped his head. “It’s good to see you.”

Whistlepaw hurried to meet her, sniffing the wound at Frostpaw’s neck. “Does it still hurt?”

Frostpaw ducked away. “No,” she purred, seeing the worry on the WindClan apprentice’s face.

Mothwing brushed around Frostpaw. “She was very sick, but she’s going to be fine.”

“And RiverClan?” Kestrelflight’s eyes rounded hopefully.

“RiverClan gets stronger by the day,” Mothwing told him.

The WindClan medicine cat looked relieved. “That’s good to hear.” His gaze flitted back to Frostpaw. “You’ve been through so much.”

“But it’s over now.” Frostpaw padded to the water’s edge. “We’re ready to begin again.”

Mothwing joined her. “Shall we start?”

Frostpaw could feel excitement pricking in her fur. There had been times when she never thought she'd see this day. For a while she'd given up on ever becoming a medicine cat; she'd almost chosen the life of a warrior. Now here she was, about to receive her medicine-cat name. But first Whistlepaw would receive hers. Frostpaw watched, warmth flooding beneath her pelt as Whistlepaw blinked solemnly at her mentor.

"I, Kestrelflight," he began, "medicine cat of WindClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to learn the skills of a medicine cat and listened well to all I've taught her. She has journeyed far to right a wrong and returned with experience and wisdom beyond her age. With your help she will serve her Clan for many moons."

Frostpaw felt a rush of pride for her friend. Whistlepaw had worked so hard for this. She swallowed back a purr as Kestrelflight went on.

"Whistlepaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Whistlepaw replied.

"Then, by the powers of StarClan, I give you your true name as a medicine cat. From this moment, you will be known as Whistlebreeze. StarClan honors your honesty, your courage, and your kindness. We welcome you as a full medicine cat of WindClan."

Frostpaw hurried to congratulate Whistlebreeze, purring and winding around her happily. "You're going to be a great medicine cat."

"I hope so." Whistlebreeze's eyes shone.

"You've already saved one life." Gratitude bubbled in Frostpaw's chest. "Mine." When Splashtail had attacked her on the moor, it was Whistlepaw who'd taken her to the horseplace and tended to the deep gash in her throat. Frostpaw had sworn her to secrecy, not knowing then who had tried to kill her or whether they might try again.

Whistlebreeze purred. "It was the Twoleg who saved you, not me."

“I would have died on the moor if not for you.” Frostpaw was suddenly solemn. “If I had, who knows what would have become of RiverClan.”

“Of *all* the Clans.” Kestrelflight had been listening. “Without you, we might not have realized in time that Splashtail was a murderer and a liar and that he never had StarClan’s blessing.” He glanced at Whistlebreeze. “I wish you’d told me Frostpaw was hurt, though,” he mewed. “I could have helped.”

“It would have been too dangerous,” Frostpaw told him. “We didn’t know then that it was Splashtail who was the greatest threat to the Clans.” She looked back at Whistlebreeze. “I know I got you into trouble, but I’m grateful to you for taking the risk.”

“I’m glad I did,” Whistlebreeze purred. “You saved RiverClan. You made everything okay again.”

Mothwing was standing beside the water, her tail twitching eagerly. “Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.” Excitement fizzed in Frostpaw’s chest. She hurried to stand in front of her mentor.

Mothwing blinked at her happily, then looked at Whistlebreeze. “You have both exceeded our expectations,” she mewed. “We are privileged to have been mentors to such exceptional cats.”

Kestrelflight whisked his tail, and Whistlebreeze glanced shyly at her paws.

“StarClan, look down on this apprentice.” Mothwing’s mew was almost a purr. “Frostpaw has risked her life again and again for her Clan. She traveled to the river’s beginning and found a wisdom rare in any cat. She’s worked relentlessly, learning her skill, caring for her Clan, even when they rejected her. She will be a true medicine cat. With your help, she will serve her Clanmates for many moons.” She gazed fondly at Frostpaw, and Frostpaw’s throat tightened.

A true medicine cat. It was all she ever wanted.

“Do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?”

“Yes,” Frostpaw replied. “Always.”

“Then, by the powers of StarClan, I give you your true name as a medicine cat. Frostpaw, from this moment you will be known as

Frostdawn. May you lead RiverClan into the bright dawn of a new day! StarClan honors your integrity, your courage, and your determination, and we welcome you as a full medicine cat of RiverClan."

Frostdawn. She felt a joy so intense it was almost like pain. If only Curlfeather could see this. Her mother had tried to make her into a fake medicine cat. And now that lie had become the truth. *I am a real medicine cat.* RiverClan's moons of suffering were over. Frostdawn lifted her chin. *I'm going to take care of my Clan. I'm going to make sure they never suffer again.*

Mothwing followed her out, her breath billowing. "Are you sure you're ready to make the journey again so soon?"

"Yes." Frostdawn blinked at her reassuringly. "RiverClan has waited long enough for a leader." Why wait another day for StarClan's blessing?

She thought her paws would ache from yesterday's journey to the Moonpool, but they felt as light as feathers, itching to leave now that the moon had risen.

"Be careful," Mothwing warned.

"Don't worry." Frostdawn felt no fear, even though they would pass the place where Curlfeather had been killed. "Icewing will be with me."

She looked across the clearing. Icewing was standing at the camp entrance. Her fur looked silver, and her bright blue eyes shone in the darkness. Frostdawn knew it had been hard for the returning she-cat, coming home only to find one of her surviving kits exiled, and the other living in WindClan. But Nightsky had returned to RiverClan, and Icewing had accepted Breezeheart's punishment with grace.

Frostdawn touched her muzzle to Mothwing's cheek. "I'll be back by dawn." She hurried to meet Icewing. "Are you ready to receive your nine lives?"

"The sooner the better." Icewing shook out her pelt.

They walked in silence through the reed beds to the path at the edge of the moor, which cut through the heather and met the stream that would lead them to the Moonpool hollow. Frostdawn had made

this journey twice already: once with her mother, then with Owlnose. She remembered Curlfeather's haste, pressing on as though frightened she'd miss her chance. She remembered Owlnose hanging back, every paw step filled with doubt. This time it felt right. Icewing padded beside her, never rushing, never hesitating, putting one paw in front of the other as though she wished only to make the journey with as little fuss as possible.

"Do you think we can make RiverClan into the Clan it used to be?" Frostdawn asked as the path began to climb.

"Don't you?" Icewing looked at her, blues eyes flashing in the moonlight.

"I'm going to try." Frostdawn looked ahead. She could see the tall cliffs of the Moonpool hollow rising against the star-specked sky. Did StarClan know they were coming? Had they been watching? She thought of the time she'd spent with the park cats, the group of cats Riverstar had lived among before he traveled to the forest and founded RiverClan. Riverstar had learned his patient, kindly ways from them, and had striven to make RiverClan a Clan that cared about life beyond its own borders. Somewhere along the way, though, RiverClan had changed, and become more inward-facing. Frostdawn wanted to change that.

"I think we should aim to do better than make RiverClan the Clan it used to be," Icewing mewed.

Frostdawn glanced at her. Did Icewing have plans to make the Clan powerful, like Curlfeather and Splashtail had wanted?

"I want it to be a Clan that can weather any storm," Icewing went on. "I want our Clanmates to have a depth of honor that means that whatever they face, they will always behave like true warriors."

Frostdawn thought of Gorseclaw and Brackenpelt taunting Tigerstar like fox-hearts from the tree-bridge. She remembered Minnowtail and Lizardtail driving Whorlpelt back each time he reached for the bank, knowing full well he couldn't swim. She'd been ashamed that they were her Clanmates.

"RiverClan has been struggling for a long time," Icewing went on. "But if I've learned anything from my time away from the Clans, it's that being a true warrior is something that happens in your heart. It

can’t be learned through rules. It can’t be taught through training. It must be felt first.”

“Like being a medicine cat,” Frostdawn mewed.

Icewing looked at her, curious.

“You can’t *learn* to have visions,” Frostdawn explained. “I tried, remember? When I had to choose a leader. It didn’t work. I couldn’t reach StarClan by wishing. And when I trained as a warrior, I could learn all the battle moves there were to learn, but I never truly felt like a fighter.”

“When did you first feel like a medicine cat?” Icewing asked.

“I’m not sure,” Frostdawn told her. “It happened slowly. I knew the herbs and how to treat wounds, but I think my visions only came once my heart was ready for them.”

Icewing looked suddenly determined. “I want my warriors to be warriors from the heart,” she mewed. “I want them to *enjoy* being warriors, to feel they are following their deepest nature. I want the other Clans to respect us not because they fear us, but because they trust us.” Icewing glanced up at the wide, crow-black sky. “I want StarClan to be proud of us.”

Frostdawn’s heart quickened. “When I was with the park cats, I learned to meditate,” she explained. “Riverstar thought it was so important. Perhaps we could . . .”

Icewing turned to meet her gaze. “We should begin meditating again,” she agreed. “I’ll make sure of it. Together, Frostdawn, I know that we can make RiverClan the Clan that Riverstar envisioned.”

Frostdawn’s pelt tingled with joy. She was suddenly more excited about the future than ever. She was even more certain that in choosing Icewing as RiverClan’s leader, she’d made the right decision.

The moon was high when they reached the Moonpool. Icewing didn’t hesitate but padded to the water’s edge and crouched beside it.

Frostdawn joined her, heart thumping. She was finally going to see the ceremony she’d prepared for twice before. She didn’t know what to expect. She blinked at Icewing. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Icewing blinked back, and together they touched their noses to the smooth surface of the pool.

Stars rushed at Frostdawn, swirling down from a great black sky. She was surrounded by them as though in a shimmering forest made of light. StarClan was coming to approve her choice. She felt suddenly nervous. As she strained to see between light and darkness, the stars began to settle into shapes, and she realized she was surrounded by row upon row of star-pelted warriors. Were they *all* here? The whole of StarClan? She felt Icewing beside her, as steady as a rock.

"Frostpaw." Riverstar's rich mew made her turn. The broad-shouldered tom was padding toward her. "I should call you Frostdawn now." He touched his nose gently to her head. "You've done so well." He was purring. "So very well . . ."

Icewing blinked in wonder at the vast ranks of starry cats.

Riverstar turned his gaze toward the white she-cat. Frostdawn saw a warm familiarity in his eyes, like he knew exactly who was looking at. "We've been waiting for you," he purred. "For the warrior who will bring RiverClan's moons of turmoil to an end." He glanced at Frostdawn once more. "You chose well, little one."

"She's not a little one anymore," Icewing told him. "She's quite formidable."

Riverstar's eyes twinkled. "I knew she would be." He stepped back and swished his tail. "Are you ready?" he asked Icewing.

"Yes," Icewing mewed. "I want to get back to my Clan."

"The work ahead of you, rebuilding RiverClan, will not be easy," Riverstar warned. "I hope the lives we give you here will help you." He turned to the great mass of starry warriors, and as he dipped his head, a tom padded from among them.

It was Jayclaw. Frostdawn's heart leaped. She wanted to rush to meet him and rub her muzzle along his jaw. She tried to catch his eye, but he didn't seem to see her. Disappointment dropped like a stone in her belly. *It's not my vision,* she reminded herself as Jayclaw stopped in front of Icewing*. It belongs to Icewing*.

"The hardest thing for me these past moons," Jayclaw told the white warrior, "was seeing Frostdawn's Clanmates turn their tails on her. No cat seemed able to see the truth in my kit's heart or the lies in Splashtail's. With this in mind, I give you, along with this life, the gift of intuition, so that in the future you may discern the truth,

however murky the waters seem to be.” He touched his muzzle to Icewing’s head.

Frostdawn stiffened as Icewing’s pelt bushed. Did receiving a life hurt? The white warrior jerked as though lightning had jolted through her. Was this how StarClan gave their blessing? Frostdawn tried not to flinch away, relieved as Jayclaw withdrew and Icewing’s pelt smoothed.

She swallowed back a mew as Reedwhisker padded forward. She wanted to greet the RiverClan deputy and promise him she wouldn’t let his death be in vain. But she held back as he spoke to Icewing.

“With this life I give you the gift of sensing danger, to protect you and your Clan.” As he touched his nose to Icewing’s head, the white warrior’s pelt rippled along her spine. Her ears flattened, but she didn’t tremble this time. Frostdawn was relieved. She didn’t want to watch her Clanmate suffer.

Her heart lifted as Harelight padded forward to take Reedwhisker’s place. He seemed calm, his pelt glossy, and she was glad that after such a brutal and sudden death, he seemed at peace.

“Your Clanmates may have followed Splashtail,” he mewed, “but don’t judge them too harshly. They felt they had no choice. What they did, however cruel, they did to protect one another. Never forget this.”

The white tom touched his nose to Icewing’s head. “With this life, I give you the gift of forgiveness.” Icewing seemed to relax, her tail softening as he drew back. Harelight blinked at her fondly, clearly remembering their old friendship.

Icewing met his gaze solemnly, and Frostdawn found herself swallowing back a rush of grief. They had lost so many friends. She watched Harelight turn away and take his place among the rows of StarClan cats.

A she-cat stepped forward, a dappled golden tabby with amber eyes that gleamed like suns. Was this Leopardstar? Frostdawn’s breath caught. She suddenly remembered the fevered dream when she’d seen the two warriors beside the moonlit river. *RiverClan and ShadowClan will become one.* It had been Leopardstar! She remembered now, vaguely, stories her mother had told her, and she

pricked her ears as the golden tabby spoke, curious what this former leader would say.

“You will rank among the best,” Leopardstar mewed, “but don’t let success go to your head. Never think you’re above advice. Listen to your Clanmates and heed their words.” As Icewing dipped her head, Leopardstar touched it with her muzzle. “With this life, I give you humility.”

Icewing’s tail swished. Her spine curved as though a great weight were pressing on it; then she straightened as Leopardstar pulled away and watched the golden tabby return to her place among the others. Her eyes were wide, like those of a kit seeing the river for the first time.

Frostdawn didn’t recognize the next StarClan warrior. He was lean and thick-furred, with a light brown pelt and golden eyes. Would Mothwing be able to tell her when she described him? Perhaps Mosspelt would know. Frostdawn suddenly wondered if one day she’d recognize all these warriors. Would they become like Clanmates? As a medicine cat, she would have one paw in her own Clan and another in the stars. The thought pleased her. She could help her Clan.

The brown tom spoke. “When I realized I no longer had the heart of a warrior, I became a medicine cat.”

Frostdawn frowned, trying to remember the nursery stories her Clanmates had told her about long-dead warriors. Did Icewing know who this was?

“Learn the strength and weaknesses of your warriors,” he went on. “Make sure they follow the path that suits them best.” He blinked at her gravely. “To help you, with this life I give you wisdom.”

As he leaned forward to touch Icewing’s head, she twitched, curling her claws, flattening her ears until he pulled away. She watched him go, her gaze thoughtful for a moment. Then her eyes widened in recognition of the pale gray tabby she-cat who stepped forward next.

“Willowshine!” Icewing breathed.

Frostdawn’s pelt prickled uneasily. Mothwing rarely spoke of the medicine cat she’d worked beside many moons ago, but Frostdawn had heard some whispers around the camp about how she’d bravely

gone into the Dark Forest to try to free Bramblestar from the clutches of the wicked Ashfur.

“One of the most difficult parts of being a warrior is holding on to one’s honor and integrity, even in the face of temptation. . . .” The way Willowshine’s bright green eyes shimmered told Frostdawn that her experiences in the Dark Forest still haunted her, even in StarClan. “With this life, I give you strength to resist evil influences. Never be tempted; never be cowed. Always follow the path of a true warrior.” As she touched her nose to Icewing’s head, Icewing flinched. A low whine sounded in her throat, and she seemed to stagger. Then she straightened, trembling as though it took all her effort, and as Willowshine turned away, she let out a long, shaky breath.

Frostdawn was relieved to see Riverstar step forward next. Surely he wouldn’t cause Icewing pain!

He gazed at the white warrior with the same pleasure as when they’d first arrived. “You will need to be able to make difficult decisions even in the midst of a crisis,” he told her. “Learn to quiet your mind so that you can think clearly.” He leaned forward. “With this life I give you the gift of tranquility.” As he touched her head, Icewing’s pelt seemed to turn to water, shimmering like the river at sunhigh.

I can teach her to meditate, Frostdawn thought eagerly. She imagined sitting with Icewing beside the river at dawn, teaching her everything she’d learned from the park cats. She blinked. Riverstar was already turning away. Another tom took his place. This cat was large and shambling, his thick pelt shaggy, and Frostdawn saw that his jaw was twisted. *Crookedstar.* She had heard of this ancient RiverClan leader and pricked her ears, eager to hear him speak.

“With nine lives,” he began, “you will live to see Clanmates born and Clanmates die. Each loss will feel as though it is taking something from you. But you must never weaken or give in to grief. Your Clan needs you to carry on with the same commitment and strength you started with. So, with this life”—he reached his muzzle forward—“I give you resilience.”

Icewing stiffened as he touched her, as though bracing herself against a fierce gust of wind. She relaxed as he stepped away, and

Frostdawn's heart quickened as she saw the warrior who was to give Icewing her ninth and final life.

Icewing greeted the old leader, eyes glistening with emotion. "Mistystar."

How young the former RiverClan leader looked! Frostdawn had only known her as an old, frail cat. But now her pelt was glossy. Muscles rippled beneath it, and her tail was as thick as a bulrush. Frostdawn tensed as a thought struck her. Would Mistystar be angry at what had happened to RiverClan since she'd died? Would she be disappointed by her Clanmates' indecision and bad choices? She searched the blue-gray she-cat's gaze but saw nothing but compassion.

"You have a long life ahead of you," Mistystar told Icewing. "And although you are a leader, you are still a warrior. You must fight harder and longer than any of your Clanmates. You must be the first into battle and the last to leave it. Your Clan will rely on you to protect them." She blinked slowly at Icewing, then leaned close, her mew thickening with emotion. "With this life, I give you courage to face whatever must be faced. Courage to protect your Clan."

Icewing shuddered as Mistystar touched her nose to her head. Her pelt spiked along her spine. But she squared her shoulders and held her ground until Mistystar pulled away to stand beside a muscular blue-gray tom. Frostdawn thought it might be her brother, Stonefur. The former RiverClan leader blinked again, her eyes shining. "I hail you by your new name, Icestar. Your old life is no more. You have gained the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of RiverClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

Frostdawn looked expectantly at the rows of starry cats as they began to cheer: "Icestar! Icestar!" Frostdawn joined in, but her heart sank when the starry pelts began to move. They merged and spun, circling upward like a whirlpool of light lifting into the dark sky above. She'd been hoping to have a chance to talk to Jayclaw. As the stars disappeared, Frostdawn opened her eyes. The Moonpool lay unruffled in front of her. *I'll see Jayclaw again,* she told herself. *I'm a*

medicine cat. She straightened, feeling stiff. How much time had passed?

Icestar stretched beside her.

“Did it hurt?” Frostdawn looked over her pelt anxiously.

“Sometimes,” Icestar told her. “But I’m fine now, and it was worth it.” Her eyes glowed in the moonlight. “I’ve shared with the stars.” She purred, then turned toward the dimpled path. “Now it’s time we went home. There’s work to do.”

Mothwing hurried to meet them. “Did they give their blessing?” she asked eagerly.

“Yes.” Icestar’s eyes shimmered like the sky.

Mothwing lifted her tail happily.

Duskfur called to the sleeping Clan. “Icestar is back!” Her mew rang in the chilly air. “StarClan has blessed her.”

Warriors began crowding from their dens. Owlnose crossed the clearing, Shimmerpelt at his heels. Lizardtail and Nightsky, returned now from ThunderClan, whisked their tails excitedly. Graypaw and Mistpaw squeezed out of the apprentices’ den they’d outgrown moons ago. Havenpelt hurried from the nursery with Troutkit, Rapidkit, and Floatkit stumbling sleepily after her, getting under the paws of the warriors as they circled the clearing excitedly.

Mothwing wove around Frostdawn. “Did it all go smoothly?”

“Yes.” Frostdawn purred. “I saw Crookedstar and Leopardstar—I think it was Leopardstar—and a medicine cat who’d been a warrior first.” She wanted to tell Mothwing everything about meeting StarClan, but Icestar had padded to the head of the camp.

As the new RiverClan leader waited for her Clan to settle, Frostdawn followed Mothwing to the edge of the clearing and took her place among her Clanmates to hear Icestar speak. She noticed that some of the warriors looked anxious.

“Did StarClan really give you their blessing?” Mallownose asked.

“Yes,” Icestar told him.

“And they gave you nine lives?” The light brown tabby tom’s gaze glittered with worry.

Icestar looked lightly at Frostdawn. “Did they?” There was humor in her eyes. “I think you need to reassure the Clan.”

Frostdawn didn't hesitate. "StarClan accepted Icestar and gave her nine lives," she mewed. "She is the true leader of RiverClan."

Her Clanmates pricked their ears excitedly. Murmurs rippled around the clearing.

"It's real this time."

"She has nine lives!"

"Icestar!"

Frostdawn's heart soared as RiverClan began to chant their new leader's name.

"Icestar!"

"Icestar!"

Their mews filled the camp, lifting to the pale blue sky.

Icestar let them chant for a few moments, then swished her tail, her stern gaze calling for silence. "There's work to do," she mewed, and their calls died away. "I will need your help. We have much to make up for and much to improve." She looked around the gathered Clan. "I will need a deputy I can trust and who has enough determination and good common sense to help me build RiverClan into a Clan we can be proud of."

Frostdawn blinked, surprised that she hadn't even thought about who RiverClan's deputy would be. She'd been far too concerned with the leader. She glanced around at her Clanmates. Which one of them would be strong enough and reliable enough to aid Icestar? She shifted her paws. After everything that had happened, which one of them would Icestar be able to trust?

Icestar's blue gaze was fixed on one warrior. "Owlnose." She beckoned the brown tabby tom forward with a nod.

Owlnose seemed to freeze, then glanced uncertainly at his Clanmates as though wondering if she'd meant to choose him.

"You had a chance to be leader," Icestar told him, "and you turned it down. I respect that."

"Why?" Owlnose looked alarmed. "If I hadn't run away from the responsibility, Splashtail would never have taken over—"

She cut him off. "Do you really *believe* that?" She stared at him. "Splashtail would have killed any cat who stood between him and power." Then she flicked her tail as though dismissing the past. "But Splashtail no longer concerns me. It is the cats standing before me

who I care about." Her gaze flitted around her Clan once more while Owlnose waited nervously at the edge of the clearing. "You were all used," she told them. "Your actions and words were twisted by a skilled manipulator. He used your loyalty and courage against you. He threatened the vulnerable and exploited the weak. He made you believe that not supporting him would destroy the Clan, when the opposite was true." Her blue eyes burned. "We must forgive one another, and we must forgive ourselves."

Frostdawn tensed as Icestar looked directly at her. "Frostdawn alone stood up to Splashtail, and she nearly paid with her life more than once." Frostdawn dipped her head, feeling self-conscious, relieved when Icestar's gaze swept toward her Clanmates once more. "But you have all been courageous in your own way." The new RiverClan leader looked back at Owlnose. "You, Owlnose, turned down leadership because you knew you weren't ready. That requires humility and self-awareness. You have grown and changed over the past moons. Our Clanmates have told me that you fought bravely in battle and that you spoke up for them. You've been pragmatic and loyal. I have no doubt that you will make a wise and capable deputy and that, as time goes on, you will grow in confidence and skill so that one day, if called upon, you will be able to lead RiverClan." Her eyes rounded with a question. "Will you accept the role of deputy?"

Owlnose stared at Icestar in amazement, as though he couldn't believe she was talking about *him*. Then he padded forward, out of the crowd, into the clearing. He stopped, and his gaze grew solemn. He squared his shoulders. "I would be honored," he mewed. "I will protect RiverClan as though it were my kit."

Icestar purred her approval, adding, "I say these words before the spirits of StarClan, so they can hear and approve my choice. Owlnose will be the new deputy of RiverClan."

"Owlnose!"

"Owlnose!"

"Owlnose!"

As her Clanmates began to chant the name of their new deputy, Frostdawn felt peace wash over her. Relief flowed like a river through her heart. Finally, RiverClan had a leader blessed by their ancestors, and a deputy she knew would support and protect his

Clan. She looked around the frosty clearing, early-morning sunshine gleaming on her Clanmates' pelts. RiverClan had survived and was whole again.

But Icestar hadn't finished. She nodded to Owlnose, signaling him to take his place beside her, then looked at Graypaw and Mistpaw. "Now I must do something that gives me great pleasure." Her eyes sparkled. "I'm going to give you the names you truly deserve."

Graypaw and Mistpaw hurried forward.

"Graypaw. Mistpaw." Icestar looked from one to the other. "You have each trained hard to learn the ways of a warrior. You have already fought in battle and risked your lives to protect your Clan. I ask your ancestors to honor you and protect you in turn." Frostdawn's heart swelled as Icestar padded toward them. At last her littermates would have true warrior names. "Graypaw," Icestar mewed. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code even at the cost of your life?"

Graypaw nodded eagerly. "I do."

"Then, by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment you will be known as Graysky."

"Graysky!"

"Graysky!"

Icestar silenced the Clan with a swish of her tail. She hadn't finished.

"Mistpaw." She turned her blue gaze on the tortoiseshell and white she-cat. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code even at the cost of your life?"

"Yes." Mistpaw was trembling. "I do."

"Then, by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment you will be known as Mistpool."

"Mistpool!"

"Mistpool!"

This time Icestar let her Clanmates' yowls ring out across the reed beds.

"Graysky!"

"Mistpool!"

Frostdawn's throat tightened as her littermates looked at each other, delighted.

"Frostdawn."

Her pelt twitched with surprise as Icestar called to her. What did she want? The Clan grew quiet as Frostdawn padded toward the RiverClan leader and stopped in front of her.

"*Your* path has been the hardest," Icestar mewed. Around the clearing, their Clanmates leaned closer as Icestar went on. "It has not always been clear which way you should go. And yet you never stopped for a moment. My warriors have been brave, but *you* have shown courage beyond your calling. You have saved your Clan, and your loyalty and determination are a lesson to us all." She touched her nose to Frostdawn's head, and Frostdawn felt a rush of happiness as Icestar's breath warmed her fur. "It is important that we recognize what you have done for us. We are grateful to have you as a medicine cat."

Graysky and Mistpool wove around her, purring loudly. Their Clanmates hurried forward to join them.

"Frostdawn!"

"Frostdawn!"

Jostled by warm pelts, surrounded by purrs, Frostdawn craned her neck to see Mothwing. Her former mentor's eyes glistened with emotion as their gazes met. Then Mothwing lifted her muzzle and joined the happy yowling. Frostdawn felt the last of the bitterness and anger, which had burned in her heart over the past moons, melt away. *I was never entirely alone.* She thought of Nightheart and Sunbeam, Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icestar. They hadn't been with her every paw step of the way, but she couldn't have done this without them. She'd felt alone and voiceless in a dangerous world. But her Clan could see her now. They could hear her, and they seemed thankful to have her back. Frostdawn began to purr. For the first time in a long time, she realized that she was looking forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 23

The snow had cleared. It was still a long way to newleaf, but sunshine had brought a little warmth to this patch of forest on the ridge overlooking the lake.

“Nightheart!” Finchlight called from the sun-dappled slope below. “What are you doing up there?”

“Admiring the view!” he called back. Nightheart could see the water from up here, sparkling between the bare trees. He closed his eyes, relishing the sun on his pelt.

They’d come hunting, and Squirrelstar had given them permission to eat before they brought their catch back to camp. Sparkpelt was with them, and Sunbeam. Nightheart had wanted Sunbeam to stay in camp. She was expecting kits, and he wished she’d rest more, but she’d insisted exercise would do her good. The long moon of frost and snow had kept the whole Clan close to camp, and now she wanted to stretch her legs.

Nightheart was pleased that she’d come. The air up here was clean and fresh and smelled of the mountains. And they’d been lucky with their hunt. Finchlight and Sparkpelt were sharing a squirrel while Sunbeam ate the sparrow Nightheart had caught for her.

He could see RiverClan’s reed beds on the far side of the lake and the river running through them. He’d been impressed by how quickly RiverClan had found its paws. These past two moons had seen its warriors grow sleek and plump despite the harsh weather. At the last two Gatherings, they’d seemed calmer, without the defensive anger that had prickled in their pelts at the Gatherings in the moons before. Icestar was a confident leader, and her Clanmates always watched her quietly and proudly as she addressed the Clans. Owlnose had proved a sensible choice of deputy, his warmth and humility a good match for Icestar, who could occasionally seem a little cool. And Frostdawn seemed almost like another cat—self-assured, quick to purr, clearly happy now in RiverClan.

“Nightheart!” Finchlight called him again, and he bounded down the steep ridge, stopping as he reached her. She tossed a vole toward him. “You must be hungry. We’ve been out all morning.”

Nightheart grabbed the still-warm prey and carried it to where Sunbeam was lying among the leaves.

She looked up from her sparrow. “Finchlight and Sparkpelt say I should name one of the kits Blaze.”

Nightheart glanced sharply at his mother and sister.

“I know *you* didn’t like being named in memory of Firestar,” Sparkpelt explained, “but your kits might be different. They might be proud to have such famous kin.”

Sunbeam’s eyes sparked teasingly. “They also suggested Ember and Scorch,” she told him. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Does everyone in our family have to be named after *fire*?” Nightheart huffed at his mother as he settled beside Sunbeam with his vole, but he wasn’t angry. He was amused that, even now, Sparkpelt was trying to make sure her kin would be remembered as Firestar’s descendants.

Finchlight blinked at Sunbeam. “Have you thought of naming one of your kits for Berryheart?”

Sparkpelt shot Finchlight a look that warned her to be quiet, that silently reminded her that Sunbeam might not want to dwell on the memory of her mother.

Nightheart moved closer to Sunbeam. “What’s this craze for naming kits after their kin?” he mewed.

“It’s okay,” Sunbeam glanced at him gratefully. “I wondered if I should,” she told Finchlight. “If only for Sparrowtail. He’d like Berryheart to be remembered. But it would be hard on a kit to carry the name of a traitor. And I’d rather forget about the past. My future is more important to me.”

Nightheart nuzzled her cheek. “We’re going to wait until our kits are born before we decide on their names,” he told Sparkpelt and Finchlight. “We want to choose names that reflect who they are, not who their kin once were.”

“I just hope one of them is a daughter,” Sunbeam confessed. “I’ve always wanted one.”

Finchlight puffed out her chest. “Daughters are the best.”

Nightheart purred. “I hear sons can be quite good too.”

Sparkpelt’s green eyes glittered fondly. “You will love them whatever they are.”

“I just hope they’re as wonderful as Nightheart,” Sunbeam mewed.

“I hope they’re as wonderful as Sunbeam,” Nightheart mewed in return.

Finchlight rolled her eyes.

Sparkpelt nudged her. “You’ll be the same when you find a mate.”

Nightheart took a bite of the vole. It was juicy for leaf-bare prey and tasted rich and musky, like the forest it had lived in. *Thank you, StarClan, for this meal.* He looked up at the sky, even bluer than the lake below. *Thanks for Sunbeam and my kin and my Clan.*

Satisfaction spread like sunlight through his pelt. He wondered for a moment if Firestar had been guiding his paws, but he pushed the thought away. He was grateful to have such distinguished ancestors, but he was glad he’d forged his own identity. His Clan was proud of him for who he was now, not for being born Firestar’s kin. He was happy. At last he’d become the true warrior he’d always dreamed of being. He’d found a mate he’d love forever, and he’d proved to Sparkpelt and Finchlight that he could be brave and loyal and honorable, whatever his name.

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ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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